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The Mass Media and the Political Agenda

Politics in Action: The Increasing Difficulty of Getting Out a Presidential Message



Because policymaking often depends upon politicians' power to persuade, the ability to communicate with the American public is a key tool for policymakers. When presidents speak to the nation, they expect a large viewing audience and anticipate that their message will continue to reach the public through news reports for days afterward. But a series of changes in the mass media environment has made it much less likely that these expectations will be fulfilled today compared to just several decades ago. A tale of the initial speeches given to Congress by President Reagan in 1981 and President Obama in 2009 provides a good illustration of the profound changes in the presidential media environment discussed in this chapter.

President Ronald Reagan addressed Congress during prime time on February 18, 1981, to outline his proposed policies for economic recovery. Reagan's speech was covered live on CBS, NBC, and ABC and garnered a Nielsen rating of 60, meaning that three-fifths of the American public watched it. Beyond reaching this enormous live audience, Reagan knew he could communicate his message

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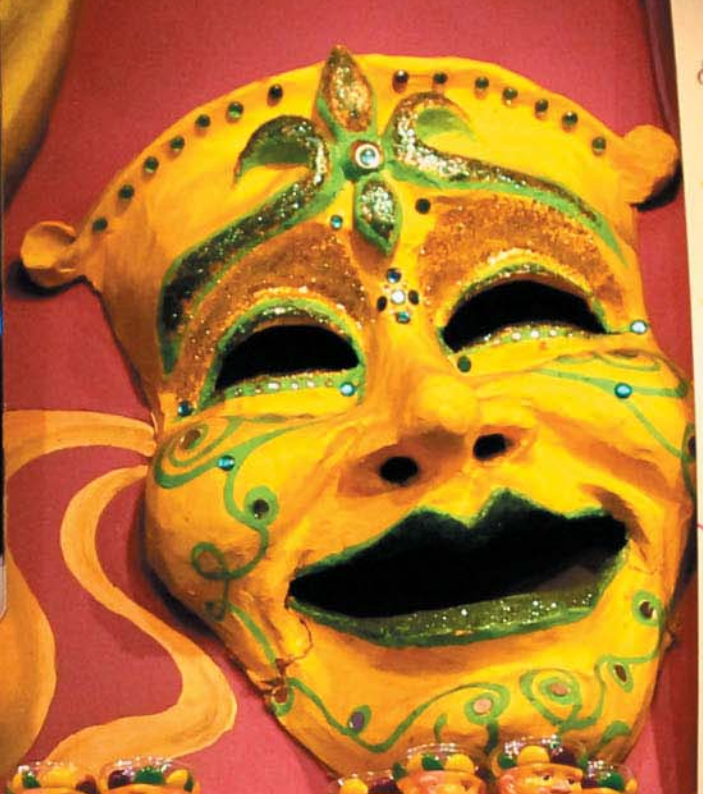
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White
Asian

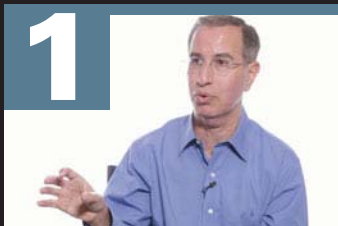
Hurricane

Malibu
Piña
Colada

Strawberry



Presidential addresses to Congress were once shared national experiences, as TV audiences had nothing else to watch when three networks dominated the airwaves. With the proliferation of channels, however, the ability of presidents to reach a mass audience has declined, as evidenced by the lack of interest at this New Orleans bar during President Obama's 2011 State of the Union speech.



1 **The Big Picture** When the president speaks on television, who is listening? Author Martin P. Wattenberg discusses the many ways that the media has changed over the twentieth century, particularly how it stopped appealing to all citizens and started targeting certain groups with specific politic opinions.



The Basics How do the media help support our democratic institutions? In this video, you will find out how a free press functions not just as a source of knowledge, but also as a public forum and a government watchdog. You'll also analyze how private ownership and partisanship impact the ability of the media to do its job.



2 Why is the freedom of the press so important in our democracy?



3 **In Context** Trace the evolution of media outlets from newspapers to the new media that exists today. In this video, University of Oklahoma political scientist Tyler Johnson examines the history of media outlets and the effect of both traditional and new media on the political information and messages that reach the public.



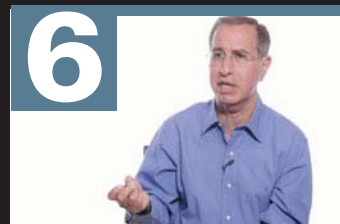
Thinking Like a Political Scientist How does the media shape public opinion? In this video, University of Oklahoma political scientist Tyler Johnson discusses how media framing works and what market factors are influencing this process.



5 **In the Real World** What is the ideal relationship between the government and the media? Real people consider whether leaks of confidential government information to the press are good for democracy or whether leaks give the government too much control over the stories being told in the newspapers.



So What? Why do the media choose to feature one story over another? Author Martin P. Wattenberg discusses the driving forces behind many of the decisions the media makes, and provides some rationale for why sometimes the real story gets lost behind the noise.



to the many people who would soon read and view news about his remarks. The next day, at least 55 percent of the public—the percentage that said they read a newspaper every day in surveys at that time—could be expected to pick up a newspaper containing stories about the president’s speech. Later that evening, roughly 38 percent could be expected to view some coverage of the president’s speech on the highly rated national newscasts at dinnertime.

The situation was markedly different when President Barack Obama went to Capitol Hill on February 24, 2009, to set forth his proposals for dealing with the economic crisis. Obama’s speech, too, was covered live on CBS, NBC, and ABC—and on Fox, Fox News, CNN, MSNBC, CNBC, Telemundo, and Univision. Yet, whereas Reagan received a rating of 60 on the 3 networks, Obama achieved a rating of just 32 on 10 channels. In this age of narrowcasting, in which a plethora of channels appeal to specialized audiences, large audiences are increasingly rare—and even presidents usually do not achieve them. Not only was the audience rating for Obama’s speech about half of Reagan’s, but he also could not count on a regular audience of news consumers learning about his remarks the next day. By the time Obama assumed office, the percentage of the public who read the newspaper daily had fallen from the 55 percent of the early 1980s to only about 32 percent. And the typical ratings of the nightly newscasts on the three traditional broadcast networks had plummeted from 38 to just 16. (Of course, there are now also cable news shows available to most viewers. But these shows, which typically get ratings of less than 2, scarcely make up for the lost audience of the network broadcasts.)

The diminishing audience for presidential messages, as well as for national news, means that the president now faces a significantly more difficult task in getting messages through to the entire public than was the case a few decades ago. For politicians other than the president, of course, this problem is even more acute. Moreover, the problem is one that may have considerable consequences. Democracy depends upon an informed citizenry, and the citizenry depends on the mass media for its information. If only a fraction of the public is paying attention to political events, then democracy may well suffer. As with many areas of American life, the future of the mass media may lie with the Internet. Yet, so far, the promise of the Internet for broadening political discourse remains unfulfilled.

Since the latter part of the twentieth century, the American political system has been in a period of **high-tech politics**—a politics in which the behavior of citizens and policymakers, as well as the political agenda itself, is increasingly shaped by technology. A key part of this evolving technology is the **mass media**, including television, radio, newspapers, magazines, and the Internet. These and other means of popular communication are called *mass media* because they reach and profoundly influence not only the elites but also the masses.

This chapter examines media politics, focusing on the rise of modern media in America’s advanced technological society, the making of the news and its presentation through the media, biases in the news, and the impact of the media on policymakers and the public. It also reintroduces the concept of the policy agenda, in which the media play an important role.

The Mass Media Today

7.1

Describe how American politicians choreograph their messages through the mass media.



Whether one is promoting a candidate, drawing attention to a social issue, or proposing a government program, political success depends on effectively communicating a message. The key is gaining control over the political agenda, which today, as throughout the period of high-tech politics, involves getting one’s priorities presented at the top of the daily news.

Politicians have learned that one way to guide the media’s focus successfully is to give the media carefully staged events to report on. A recent study of TV news coverage of the last four weeks of a presidential campaign found that 80 percent of the stories involved

high-tech politics

A politics in which the behavior of citizens and policymakers and the political agenda itself are increasingly shaped by technology.

mass media

Television, radio, newspapers, magazines, the Internet, and other means of popular communication.

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media events

Events that are purposely staged for the media and that are significant just because the media are there.

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tightly scripted appearances by the candidates.¹ Such **media events** are staged primarily for the purpose of being covered; if the media were not there, the event would probably not happen or would have little significance. Getting the right image on the TV news for just 30 seconds can have a much greater payoff than a whole day's worth of handshaking. Whereas once a candidate's G.O.T.V. program stood for "Get Out the Vote," today it is more likely to mean "Get on TV."

Slickly produced TV commercials are another important tool in high-tech politics. For example, approximately 60 percent of presidential campaign spending is now devoted to TV ads. Moreover, in this case, the message being communicated is largely a negative one: In recent presidential elections, about two-thirds of the prominently aired ads were negative ads.² Some political scientists have expressed concern that the tirade of accusations, innuendoes, and countercharges in political advertising may be poisoning the American political process.³

Media events and TV commercials are largely about image making. Such image making does not stop with the campaign; it is also a critical element in day-to-day governing. Politicians' images in the press are seen as good indicators of their clout. Image is especially important for presidents, who in recent decades have devoted much attention to maintaining a well-honed public image. Few, if any, administrations devoted so much effort and energy to the president's media appearance as did Ronald Reagan's. It has often been said that Reagan played to the media as he had played to the cameras in Hollywood, with his aides choreographing his public appearances. According to journalist Mark Hertsgaard, news management in the Reagan White House operated on the following seven principles: (1) plan ahead, (2) stay on the offensive, (3) control the flow of information, (4) limit reporters' access to the president, (5) talk about the issues you want to talk about, (6) speak in one voice, and (7) repeat the same message many times.⁴

If Reagan was exceptional in his ability to handle the media, he was far from alone in his realization of its importance to the presidency. In today's high-tech age, presidents can hardly lead the country if they cannot communicate effectively with it. President Clinton once reflected on *Larry King Live*: "The thing that has surprised me most is



Politicians often stage activities primarily for the benefit of TV cameras. The sight of a major presidential candidate walking the streets asking ordinary people for their support is something that the media finds difficult to pass up. In this swing down a street in Clinton, Iowa, Mitt Romney met perhaps 30 of the 30,000 people who voted for him in the 2012 Iowa caucuses. But the number of people who saw pictures like this in their newspaper or viewed the video footage on TV was far, far greater.

how difficult it is . . . to really keep communicating what you're about to the American people. That to me has been the most frustrating thing." According to journalist Bob Woodward, Clinton confided to a friend that "I did not realize the importance of communications and the overriding importance of what is on the evening television news. If I am not on, or there with a message, someone else is, with their message."⁵

The Development of Media Politics

7.2

Outline the key developments in the history of mass media and American politics.

There was virtually no daily press when the U.S. Constitution was written. The daily newspaper is largely a product of the mid-nineteenth century; radio and television have been around only since the first half of the twentieth century. As recently as the presidency of Herbert Hoover (1929–1933), reporters submitted their questions to the president in writing, and he responded in writing—if at all. As Hoover put it, "The President of the United States will not stand and be questioned like a chicken thief by men whose names he does not even know."⁶

Hoover's successor, Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933–1945), practically invented media politics. To Roosevelt, the media were a potential ally. Roosevelt promised reporters two presidential **press conferences**—meetings with reporters—a week, resulting in about 1,000 press conferences during his 12 years in the White House. He used presidential wrath to warn reporters off material he did not want covered, and he chastised news reports he deemed inaccurate. His wrath was rarely invoked, however, and the press revered him, never even reporting to the American public that the president was confined to a wheelchair. The idea that a political leader's health status might be public business was alien to journalists in FDR's day.

This relatively cozy relationship between politicians and the press lasted through the early 1960s. ABC's Sam Donaldson said that when he first came to Washington in 1961, "many reporters saw themselves as an extension of the government, accepting, with very little skepticism, what government officials told them."⁷ And coverage of a politician's personal life was generally off limits. For example, as a young reporter, R. W. Apple, Jr., of the *New York Times* once observed a beautiful woman being escorted to President Kennedy's suite. Thinking he had a major scoop, he rushed to tell his editor. But he was quickly told, "Apple, you're supposed to report on political and diplomatic policies, not girlfriends. No story."⁸

With the events of the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal, though, unquestioning acceptance soon gave way to skepticism and even cynicism. Newspeople have come to assume that politicians rarely tell the whole story and that their own job is to ferret out the truth. As Sam Donaldson of ABC News wrote in his book, *Hold On, Mr. President!*,

⋮ If you send me to cover a pie-baking contest on Mother's Day, I'm going to ask
⋮ dear old Mom whether she used artificial sweetener in violation of the rules, and
⋮ while she's at it, could I see the receipt for the apples to prove she didn't steal them.
⋮ I maintain that if Mom has nothing to hide, no harm will have been done. But the
⋮ questions should be asked.⁹

Thus, for example, when the Clinton–Lewinsky scandal broke, so strong was the desire to find out what the president had to hide in his personal life that 75 percent of the questions asked during the daily White House press briefings that week concerned the scandal.¹⁰ Many political scientists, however, are critical of such **investigative journalism**—the use of detective-like reporting methods to check up on the statements of governmental officials. They see the adversarial role of the media, in which reporters pit themselves against political leaders, as contributing to public cynicism and negativity about politics.¹¹

press conferences

Meetings of public officials with reporters.

investigative journalism

The use of in-depth reporting to unearth scandals, scams, and schemes, at times putting reporters in adversarial relationships with political leaders.

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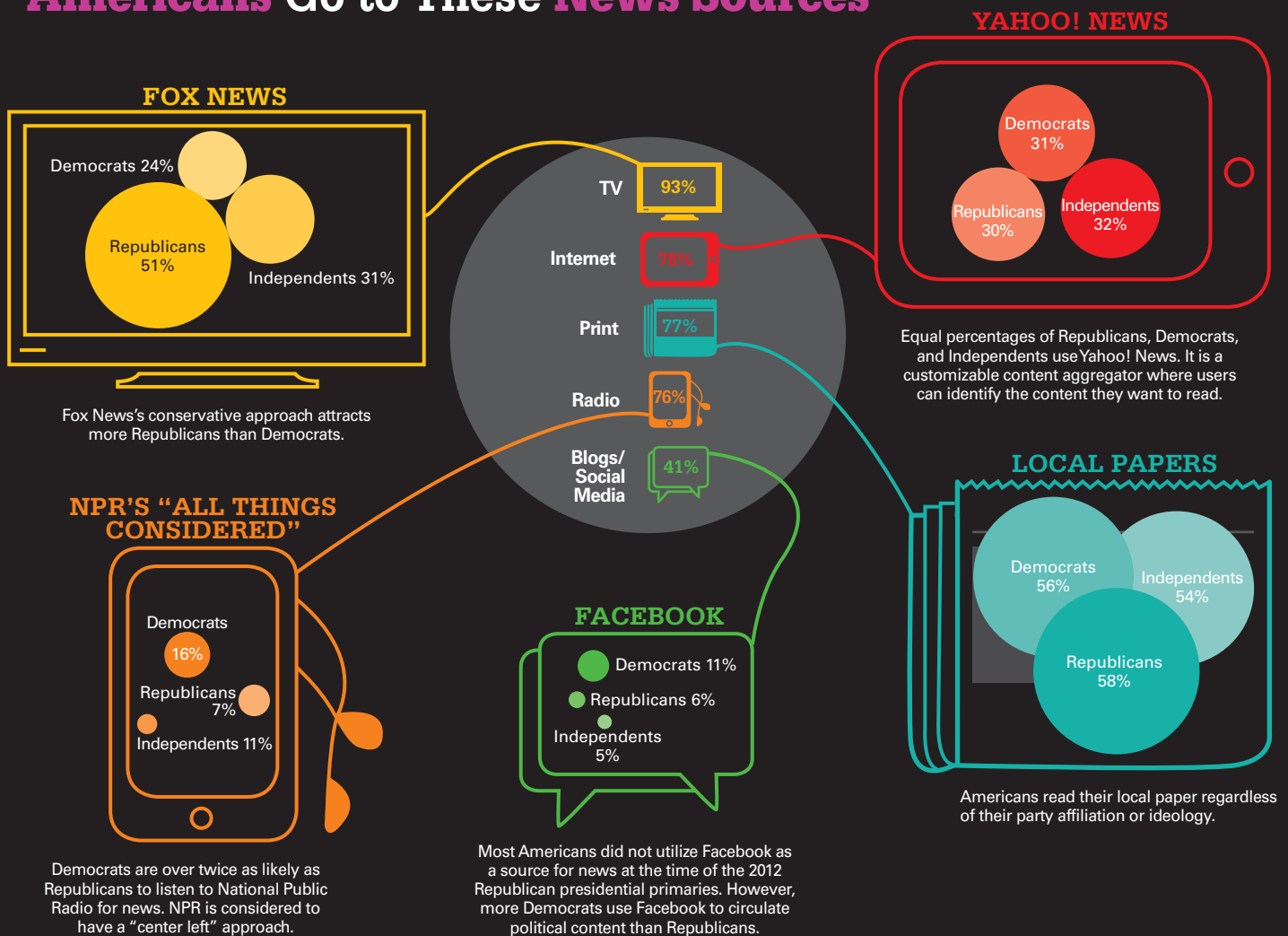
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Where Do You Get Your Political News?

Politically interested people get their news from four major sources—television, the Internet, print, and radio. Among these media sources, no single one dominates the others, but partisan trends do exist. Republicans more often go to Fox News, while Democrats more often go to NPR’s “All Things Considered”.

Americans Go to These News Sources



SOURCE: Data from American National Election Survey, "Evaluations of Government and Society Study," Release Wave 4, February 2012.

Investigate Further

Concept Where are people getting their political news? Politically interested Americans go to several types of outlets for political news. Television is still the most popular news source, but the Internet, print, and radio attract substantial audiences. Despite widespread popularity among youth, social media—like Facebook—is not a dominant source for political news.

Connection How is politics related to media choices? In general, Americans tend to seek information that reinforces their politics. The rise of cable television and Internet sources compartmentalized information. People can't read or watch all the news, so they choose a few "comfortable" content providers who reinforce their opinions and beliefs.

Cause Do Democrats and Republicans exhibit particular media consumption habits? Both have certain news sources that they favor over others. For example, Republicans rely more on Fox News while Democrats tend toward NPR's "All Things Considered." However, party crossover in media use does exist, particularly for Internet and social media sources.



The White House press secretary battles daily with the press corps, as correspondents attempt to obtain ever more information while the president's spokesperson tries to control the news agenda and spin stories in the administration's favor. Symbolizing this conflict, Obama's press secretary Robert Gibbs offered to give members of the press a chance to dunk him in a tank at the annual White House luau one year. Four reporters stepped up to take a shot at dunking Gibbs and two succeeded in dunking him in the tank.

In his analysis of media coverage of presidential campaigns since 1960, Thomas Patterson found that news coverage of presidential candidates has become increasingly less favorable. Patterson's careful analysis uncovers two major aspects of this trend toward more negative coverage: The emphasis of campaign reporting has changed dramatically from "what" to "why," and whereas the "what" was primarily candidates' policy statements, today's "why" focuses on the campaign as a horse race. This emphasis on hard-biting analysis of political maneuvering and campaign controversies naturally leads to unfavorable impressions of the candidates. Clearly, little favorable could come of coverage of such issues as how much Barack Obama knew about the incendiary comments of Reverend Wright or why Mitt Romney had a Swiss bank account. Those who run campaigns naturally complain about such coverage. As Karl Rove, one of George W. Bush's top political advisers, said after the 2000 election,

⋮ The general nature of the tone of the coverage was very much in keeping with
 ⋮ what Patterson suggests, that it is process oriented, highly cynical, negative, dis-
 ⋮ missive of issue positions, focused on the internals of the campaign and not on the
 ⋮ big messages and really serves to trivialize the whole contest.¹²

Whether or not such media coverage is ultimately in the public's best interest is much debated. The press maintains that the public is now able to get a complete, accurate, and unvarnished look at the candidates. Critics of the media charge the controversial aspects of the campaign are emphasized at the expense of an examination of the major issues.

To explore the development of media politics, we need to distinguish between two kinds of media: the **print media**, which include newspapers and magazines, and the **electronic media**, which include radio, television, and the Internet. Newspapers, radio, and television have each reshaped political communication at some point in American history. It is difficult to assess the likely impact of the Internet at this point, but there is at least some reason to believe that political communication is being reshaped once again.

□ The Print Media

The first American daily newspaper was printed in Philadelphia in 1783, but such papers did not proliferate until the technological advances of the mid-nineteenth

print media

Newspapers and magazines, as compared with electronic media.

electronic media

Television, radio, and the Internet, as compared with print media.

century. The ratification of the First Amendment in 1791, guaranteeing freedom of speech, gave even the earliest American newspapers freedom to print whatever they saw fit. In so doing, it gave the media a unique ability to display the government's dirty linen, an ability that, as we've seen, the American press today makes ample use of.

Thomas Jefferson famously said, "If I had to choose between government without newspapers, and newspapers without government, I wouldn't hesitate to choose the latter." Our first mass medium, newspapers, have continued to play a crucial role down through the centuries. Even in recent decades, with the emergence of other media, most political scientists who have researched media and politics agree on the value of newspapers as a source of information. Studies invariably find that regular newspaper readers are better informed and more likely to vote.¹³ For example, Robert Putnam, in his highly influential book entitled *Bowling Alone*, finds that "those who *read* the news are more engaged and knowledgeable about the world than those who only *watch* the news." Putnam concludes that "newspaper reading and good citizenship go together."¹⁴ All of this should hardly be surprising given that newspapers have so much more information than TV. A major metropolitan newspaper averages roughly 100,000 words daily, whereas a typical broadcast of the nightly news on TV amounts to only about 3,600 words.¹⁵

Despite the continued value of newspapers, ever since the rise of TV and TV news, American newspaper circulation rates have been declining. And with the rise of the Internet, this trend has been greatly accelerated. Whereas in 1960 one newspaper was sold for every two adults, by 2008 this ratio had plummeted to one paper for every five adults. With young adults reading newspapers at record low rates, the accelerated decline in readership is likely to continue.

Many people believe the future of the newspaper business lies with the Internet. For most major newspapers, online editions have become a source of advertising revenue. However, this advertising revenue falls far short of what newspapers need to maintain a full staff of reporters and editors; as of 2012, it represented only about 13 percent of newspapers' total take from advertising.¹⁶ Some newspapers have tried charging for access to their reporting. But this strategy of selling Internet subscriptions has thus far generated substantial revenues only for papers that focus on business news, such as the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Financial Times*. As Howard Kurtz writes, most newspapers are facing the problem that "in a world of Twitter feeds and gigabytes of gossip and a thousand other distractions, most people will see no need to pay for news. There will always be enough aggregators out there for them to cherry-pick the latest headlines, photos and video."¹⁷ The financial situation of many major city newspapers is now so tenuous that some policymakers have proposed making it possible for newspapers to become tax-exempt nonprofit organizations, as you can read about in "You Are the Policymaker: Should Newspapers Be Allowed to Be Nonprofit Organizations?"

Magazines, the other component of the print media, are also struggling in the Internet age. For the few magazines that focus on political events, this struggle is especially dire, since their circulation levels are not among the industry's highest. The so-called newsweeklies, intended for a wide audience—*Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World Report*—rank well behind such popular favorites as *Reader's Digest*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, and *National Geographic*. More serious magazines of political news and opinion—for example, the *New Republic*, *National Review*, and the *Atlantic Monthly*—tend to be read only by the educated elite, and they are outsold by other magazines meant for specific audiences, such as *Hot Rod*, *Weightwatchers Magazine*, and *Organic Gardening*.

□ The Emergence of Radio and Television

Gradually, electronic media—beginning with radio and then television—have displaced the print media as Americans' principal source of news and information. By the middle of the 1930s, radio ownership had become almost universal in America, and during World War II, radio went into the news business in earnest, taking the nation to the

You Are The Policymaker

Should Newspapers Be Allowed to Be Nonprofit Organizations?

The newspaper business is clearly in financial trouble. Long-established newspapers in Denver, Oakland, and Seattle have recently gone out of business, and papers in Philadelphia, Chicago, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, and Baltimore, among others, have recently filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy. The red ink that the newspaper business is facing is of concern to many policymakers today. President Obama, a self-proclaimed “big newspaper junkie,” has said that “it’s something that I think is absolutely critical to the health of our democracy.”

One plan to help out the struggling newspaper industry is a bill proposed by Senator Benjamin Cardin, called the Newspaper Revitalization Act. This bill would offer newspapers the option of operating as nonprofit organizations for educational purposes. Such a classification would give them a tax status similar to public broadcasting companies. With this tax status, newspapers would no longer have to pay taxes on any advertising or subscription revenue they generate. In addition, much like PBS

radio and TV stations, they could receive tax-deductible contributions.

Although most policymakers are supportive of the goal of keeping newspapers in operation, many have raised serious questions about the wisdom of this bill. Some are concerned that, if newspapers were to receive a tax break, they would become beholden to politicians and thus less likely to pursue critical stories and investigations. Others are troubled by the fact that newspapers operating as nonprofits could no longer speak out with editorial commentaries or endorsements. Any nonprofit newspaper would also have to be wary of seeming to support a particular point of view lest it risk its tax-exempt status. Proponents of the bill acknowledge these drawbacks, but reply that any newspaper in a community is better than none at all.

What do you think? Would you favor allowing newspapers to operate as nonprofit entities?

war in Europe and the Pacific. A decade later, the public was getting its news from television as well. Then, in 1960, John Kennedy faced off against Richard Nixon in the first-ever televised presidential debate. Haggard from a week in the hospital, and with his five-o’clock shadow and perspiration clearly visible, Nixon looked awful compared to the crisp, clean, attractive Kennedy. The poll results from this debate illustrate the visual power of television in American politics: people listening on the radio gave the edge to Nixon, but those who saw the debate on television thought Kennedy had won. Russell Baker, who covered the event for the *New York Times*, writes in his memoirs that “television replaced newspapers as the most important communications medium in American politics” that very night.¹⁸ Nixon blamed his poor appearance in this debate for his narrow defeat in the election.¹⁹

Much like radio and World War II in the 1940s, television took the nation to the war in Vietnam in the 1960s. Television exposed governmental naïveté—and sometimes outright lying—about the progress of the war. Every night, Americans watched the horrors of war in living color on television. President Johnson soon had two wars on his hands, one in faraway Vietnam and the other at home with antiwar protesters—both covered in detail by the media. In 1968, CBS anchor Walter Cronkite journeyed to Vietnam for a firsthand look at the state of the war. In an extraordinary TV special, Cronkite reported that the war was not being won nor was it likely to be. Watching from the White House, Johnson sadly remarked that if he had lost Cronkite, he had lost the support of the American people.²⁰

Walter Cronkite on CBS, and his counterparts on ABC and NBC, highly trusted and influential, brought about and symbolized the golden era of network news. That era is clearly coming to an end, as cable news and the Internet have increasingly supplanted the nightly news shows. As *New York Times* media critic Frank Rich wrote, “The No. 1 cliché among media critics is that we’re watching the ‘last hurrah’ of network news anchors as we have known them for nearly half a century.”²¹ Today, these shows attract an audience of about 15 percent of the population every weeknight during the

narrowcasting

Media programming on cable TV (e.g., on MTV, ESPN, or C-SPAN) or the Internet that is focused on a particular interest and aimed at a particular audience, in contrast to broadcasting.

dinner hour, as compared to about 40 percent during their heyday in the period from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s. In this era of 24-hour cable news channels and the Internet, turning on the television to get the news at a set time early in the evening seems like a quaint remnant of the past to many Americans, especially young adults.

□ Government Regulation of Electronic Media

With the invention of radio, a number of problems that the government could help with—such as overlapping use of the same frequency—soon became apparent. In 1934, Congress created the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to regulate the use of airwaves. Today, the FCC regulates communications via radio, television, telephone, cable, and satellite. The FCC is an independent regulatory body, although, like other such bodies, it is subject to political pressures, including through Congress's control over its budget and the president's appointing its members.

The FCC's regulation takes several important forms. First, to prevent near monopolies of control over a broadcast market, the FCC has instituted rules to limit the number of stations owned or controlled by one company. Since a simplification in 1996, the rule has been just that no single owner can control more than 35 percent of the broadcast market. Second, the FCC conducts periodic examinations of the goals and performance of stations as part of its licensing authority. Congress long ago stipulated that in order to receive a broadcasting license, a station must serve the public interest. The FCC has on only rare occasion withdrawn licenses for failing to do so, as when a Chicago station lost its license for neglecting informational programs and for presenting obscene movies. Third, the FCC has issued a number of fair treatment rules concerning access to the airwaves for political candidates and officeholders. The equal time rule stipulates that if a station sells advertising time to one candidate, it must be willing to sell equal time to other candidates for the same office. And the right-of-reply rule states if a person is attacked on a broadcast other than the news, then that person has a right to reply via the same station. For many years, the fairness doctrine required broadcasters to give time to opposing views if they broadcast a program slanted to one side of a controversial issue. But with the development of so many TV channels via cable, by the late 1980s this rule was seen as unnecessary and was abolished. This change opened up the way for today's highly partisan news shows, such as the conservative *O'Reilly Factor* on Fox News and the liberal *Rachel Maddow Show* on MSNBC.

□ From Broadcasting to Narrowcasting: The Rise of Cable and Cable News

The first major networks—ABC, NBC, and CBS—included the term “broadcasting” in their name because their signal was being sent out to a broad audience. Each of these networks dealt with various subjects that had widespread public appeal, including politics and government. But with the development of cable TV, market segmentation took hold. Sports buffs can watch ESPN all day, music buffs can tune in to MTV or VH1, history buffs can stay glued to the History Channel, and so forth. If you are interested in politics, you can switch between C-SPAN, C-SPAN2, CNN, MSNBC, Fox News Channel, and others. Rather than appealing to a general audience, channels such as ESPN, MTV, and C-SPAN focus on a narrow, particular interest. Hence, their mission can be termed **narrowcasting**, as opposed to the traditional broadcasting.

Narrowcasting has significantly affected media usage patterns, especially for young adults. Having grown up with narrowcasting alternatives, young adults are less likely than other age groups to be using newspapers and broadcast media as news and information sources. Interestingly, one source of information about politics that young people are more likely than other age groups to rely on is humorous shows that cover current events, or “infotainment,” as you can see in “Young People and Politics: Learning from Comedy Shows?”

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Young People & Politics

Learning from Comedy Shows?

In January 2012, the Pew Research Center asked a representative sample of Americans how they learned about the presidential campaign. One of its most interesting findings was that young people were much more likely than older people to say they regularly or sometimes learned about the campaign from comedy programs like *The Daily Show* or *Saturday Night Live*, as you can see in the following figure. When an earlier Pew survey first showed this pattern, Jon Stewart of *The Daily Show* initially dismissed the notion that young people were turning to his comedy show to learn about political events. Subsequently, his show adopted the slogan of “Keeping America Informed—Unintentionally.” Is this slogan in fact accurate? How much do comedy shows contribute to their viewers’ store of political information?

Scholars have found that by wrapping bits of political content into an amusing package, entertainment shows that cover current events can make politics more appealing to viewers who might otherwise ignore the subject, and thereby add to their political knowledge. Barry Hollander specifically examined what young adults take away from infotainment shows and concluded that they glean “at least modest amounts of campaign information from such content.”^a Matthew Baum found that exposure to entertainment-oriented TV talk shows among voters with lower-than-average political interest had a significant impact on how they evaluated the candidates.^b

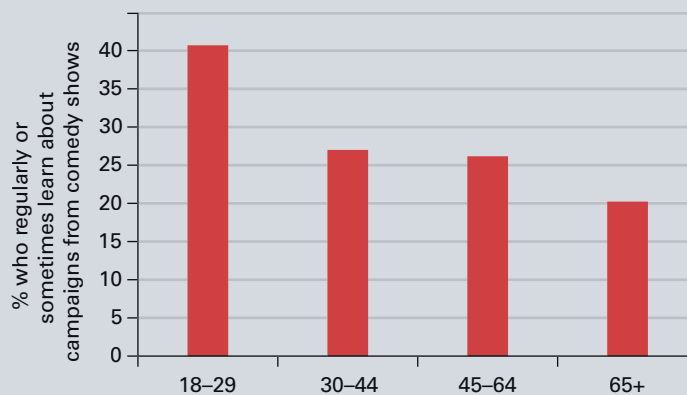
Although infotainment programs are clearly an element of political discourse today, some academic

studies have revealed their limitations in terms of actually helping viewers understand the political world. Kim and Vishak conducted an experimental study to compare learning from traditional news and infotainment coverage of the same political events. They found that subjects who were shown Jon Stewart’s coverage of the Supreme Court nomination process then in progress learned less factual information than those who were shown a similar amount of coverage of this topic culled from the nightly news. The title of their article—“Just Laugh! You Don’t Need to Remember”—nicely summarizes their most important finding with regard to infotainment shows.^c

Ironically, it is the fact that infotainment shows are not designed to convey political information that makes them desirable as shows for politicians to appear on in person. As the old saying goes, “If you want to go duck hunting, you need to go where the ducks are.” People who are not much interested in politics can often only be reached by appearing on shows that don’t normally do politics.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. How much do you think can really be learned about politics from the comedy shows that so many young people say they learn from?
2. Do you think presidential candidates should go on these shows in order to reach people who do not watch traditional news shows, or do you think the nature of comedy shows demeans politicians who appear on them?



SOURCE: Authors’ analysis of a January 2012 survey by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press.

^aBarry A. Hollander, “Late-Night Learning: Do Entertainment Programs Increase Political Campaign Knowledge for Young Viewers?” *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* (December 2005): 412.

^bMatthew A. Baum, “Talking the Vote: Why Presidential Candidates Hit the Talk Show Circuit,” *American Journal of Political Science* (April 2005): 213–34.

^cYoung Mie Kim and John Vishak, “Just Laugh! You Don’t Need to Remember: The Effects of Entertainment Media on Political Information Acquisition and Information Processing in Political Judgment,” *Journal of Communication* (June 2008): 338–60.



With so many channels to choose from in the narrowcasting age, major politicians now often agree to interviews on entertainment shows in order to reach people who don't frequently watch the news. Here, Mitt Romney can be seen chatting with Jay Leno on the *Tonight Show*.

Narrowcasting clearly has great potential for disseminating news to the American public. With the growth of cable TV news channels, television can be said to have entered a new era of bringing the news to people—and to political leaders, as it happens. Michael Bohn, a former high-ranking government intelligence officer, writes that during the George W. Bush administration cable news became a valuable source of breaking information in the White House Situation Room.²² President Bush and his aides regularly turned to cable news stations when major terrorist incidents grabbed worldwide attention.

Currently, about two-thirds of the American public subscribe to cable television and thereby have access to dozens of channels. Sometime in the not-too-distant future it is expected that most cable systems will offer 500 channels. As the number of channels increases, anyone who is really interested in politics will find political information readily available.

Yet, at least so far, the potential of cable news is generally not realized in practice. One common criticism is that cable news channels fail to systematically cover political events and issues, perhaps because their resources are far from up to the task. A content analysis of CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC programming confirms just how little substantive information cable news channels tend to convey. In this analysis, Columbia University's Project for Excellence in Journalism looked at 240 hours of cable news programming during 2003. Its report provides a telling indictment of the medium. Among the many findings were that (1) only 11 percent of the time was taken up with written and edited stories; (2) the role of the reporter was primarily to talk extemporaneously; (3) stories were repeated frequently, usually without any important new information; and (4) coverage of the news was spotty, ignoring many important topics. All in all, this comprehensive study paints a very unflattering portrait of what is shown on cable news networks, labeling much of it as simply "talk radio on television."²³

Like talk radio, cable TV news has become more and more ideologically charged in recent years. Sarah Sobieraj and Jeffrey Berry have recently studied the prevalence of "outrage" on such shows. They define "outrage discourse" as involving "efforts to provoke a visceral response from the audience, usually in the form of anger, fear, or moral righteousness through the use of overgeneralizations, sensationalism, misleading or patently inaccurate information, *ad hominem* attacks, and

partial truths about opponents.”²⁴ They estimate that such rhetoric is used on average once every 90 seconds on cable TV shows and even more frequently on talk radio. The most common mode of outrage according to their content analysis was mockery/sarcasm, followed by misrepresentative exaggeration, name calling, and insulting language.²⁵

Given such highly charged content, it is no surprise that Americans’ viewing habits for news are falling more and more into line with their own political predispositions. The basic principle of **selective exposure** in politics is that people tend to choose information sources that have similar points of view to their own and avoid those that present discordant information. In a set of carefully controlled experiments, Shanto Iyengar and Kyu Hahn took a set of news stories and randomly assigned whether they were presented to subjects as originating from Fox, CNN, or NPR. They found that conservatives chose to view stories that they had been told had come from Fox, regardless of what the subject heading of the story was. On the other side of the coin, liberals tended to avoid stories from Fox, preferring CNN or NPR instead.²⁶ In other words, the subjects selectively exposed themselves to sources of information that they thought conformed with their political leanings. Such a pattern mirrors what has actually happened to the news audience over the past decade or so. As you can see in Figure 7.1, the regular audiences for the cable news networks have become increasingly segmented by political party, with Fox being the channel that appeals to Republicans whereas MSNBC and CNN appeal more to Democrats.

Whether the evolution of narrowcasting and the segmentation of the news audience into opposing camps is good or bad for democracy is a matter of much debate. On the positive side, it can be said that the new, more ideologically tinged presentation of the news stimulates political involvement for many viewers. It also often helps to clarify what is at stake in policy decisions. On the negative side, the increasingly strident tone in the news has turned some people off from politics and contributed to a generalized decline in trust of the mass media. It has also made it harder for those who are politically involved to see the other side of political arguments and to be willing to compromise.²⁷

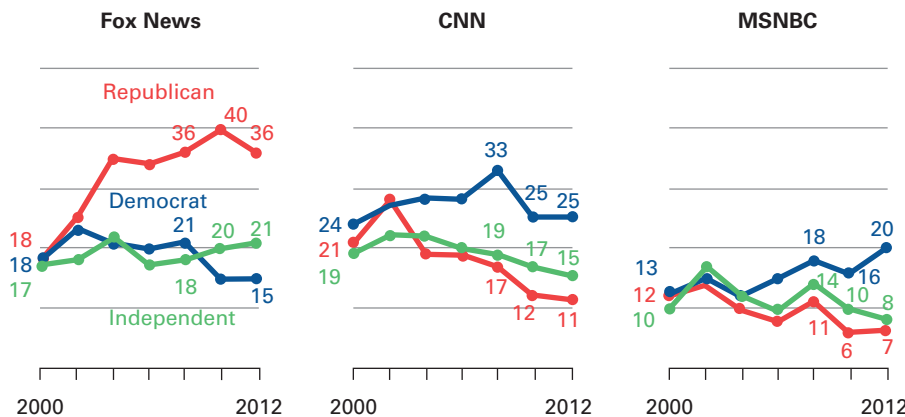
selective exposure

The process through which people consciously choose to get the news from information sources that have viewpoints compatible with their own.

FIGURE 7.1 HOW THE AUDIENCES OF CABLE NEWS CHANNELS HAVE POLARIZED INTO RIVAL PARTISAN CAMPS

In 2000, the Pew Research Center found that the regular audiences of each of the three major cable news channels were roughly equally divided between Democrats and Republicans. By 2012, Fox News viewers were much more likely to be Republicans than Democrats whereas CNN and MSNBC viewers were much more likely to be Democrats than Republicans.

Percent who regularly watch...



SOURCE: Pew Research Center Surveys.

Two other common criticisms of cable news channels are that too much of the time they show people yelling at one another and that when a story breaks they tend to sensationalize it. President Obama once remarked that he doesn't watch the cable news channels because "it feels like WWF wrestling." Softening this derogatory remark, the president went on to say that "it's not even necessarily that there's not good reporting on it; it's just that everyone is having to accelerate to get the next story, the new story, and if there's a story that people think is going to sell, then they overdo it."²⁸

In view of these issues, it is not surprising that many scholars of the media feel that the shift from network news to cable news has reduced the overall quality of political journalism. As media critic Thomas Rosensteel writes, "Network journalism originally was designed not to make a profit but to create prestige. Cable is all about profit and keeping costs low. What is disappearing is an idealism about the potential of TV as a medium to better our politics and society."²⁹

□ The Impact of the Internet

Some scholars have optimistically predicted that the Internet will be a boon for American democracy by enabling citizens to become well informed about politics. Indeed, as any college student knows, the Internet is the ultimate research tool. Want to know something specific? The answer can usually be found by searching the Internet using a few key words. If you want to know how presidential candidates stand on federal support for higher education, an Internet search should quickly reveal the answers. Or if you want to know how your two U.S. senators voted on Medicaid appropriations, the records of the Senate roll calls can be found on the Internet. In short, for anyone with basic computing skills, gaining information about political issues is now easier than ever before.

Yet the fact that so much political information is at one's fingertips via the Internet doesn't necessarily mean that people will take advantage of this unprecedented opportunity to become well informed about politics. To a far greater extent than TV, the Internet is purposive—that is, what people see is the product of their own intentional choices. Politics is only one of a myriad of subjects that one can find out about on the Internet. Most Americans' interest in politics is fairly limited. People with limited political interest will probably not be motivated to use the Internet to look up detailed information about politics very often, let alone to follow politics on a regular basis. Indeed, the data on Lycos searches displayed in Table 7.1 indicate that even during the week of the first 2008 presidential election debate, Americans were more likely to be looking for information on pop culture than politics. In the most comprehensive study of the Internet and politics to date, Matthew Hindman finds that traffic to political sites accounts for just 0.12 percent of all Web traffic, with the most frequently visited political site—HuffingtonPost.com—ranking 796th in terms of viewing hits.³⁰

So far, the Internet has had its main impact on politics largely by facilitating more communication in every conceivable direction. Through the Internet, journalists, politicians, and interest group organizers can communicate more readily with the public at large, and ordinary citizens can respond far more easily and frequently than before. As a result, there have been some important changes in the nature of campaigning as well as in political communication.

For campaigns, the ability to post information and communicate with supporters via the Internet appears to help somewhat with political mobilization. Bruce Bimber and Richard Davis's study of campaigning online found that "campaign web sites attract supporters of the candidates who display them, and the messages of these sites have a modest tendency to strengthen and reinforce voters' predispositions."³¹ As these authors point out, with the decline of traditional neighborhood-based party organizations, the Internet is providing a much-needed means to bring activists together, employing such vehicles as Meetup and Facebook.

TABLE 7.1 THE TOP 25 LYCOS SEARCHES FOR THE WEEK OF THE FIRST 2008 PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE

Every week, the search engine Lycos lists the search terms that its users have most frequently used to seek information on the Internet. Here you can find the top 25 searches for the week ending September 30, 2008—the week of the first Obama–McCain presidential debate. As you can see, only 2 of the top 25 search items reflect an interest in the election or news events. More people used the Internet to get information about pop culture figures such as Clay Aiken and Paris Hilton than to learn about the stunning news of Lehman Brothers’ bankruptcy or about the presidential candidates.

The rankings reflect what Internet users are most interested in. Political scientists have long argued that politics are only a peripheral part of most people’s lives, and these rankings clearly reflect that fact.

Rank	Search Term
1.	Clay Aiken
2.	Paris Hilton
3.	YOUTUBE
4.	Travis Barker
5.	Pamela Anderson
6.	Kim Kardashian
7.	Facebook
8.	DJ AM
9.	Britney Spears
10.	Dragonball
11.	Lindsay Lohan
12.	Sarah Palin
13.	Megan Fox
14.	Naruto
15.	WWE
16.	Kanye West
17.	Lance Armstrong
18.	Biggest Loser
19.	Bristol Palin
20.	Lehman Brothers Bankruptcy
21.	RUNESCAPE
22.	Kendra Wilkinson
23.	Carmen Electra
24.	Jennifer Hudson
25.	Eva Mendes

SOURCE: <http://50.lycos.com>.

Blogs in particular have provided political activists with a means to make their concerns heard to an extent that was previously possible only for professional journalists. Indeed, Brian Williams of NBC News remarks that because of blogs, the news media now faces competition from “people who have an opinion, a modem, and a bathrobe.” He further laments, “All of my life, developing credentials to cover my field of work, and now I’m up against a guy named Vinny in an efficiency apartment in the Bronx who hasn’t left the efficiency apartment in two years.”³² His lament appears to be somewhat exaggerated, however. In theory, anyone can challenge Brian Williams in the blogosphere, but in practice few bloggers are ever going to be able to reach as many people as a network anchor. Posting a blog entry is easy, but getting it national attention is difficult. Matthew Hindman analyzed the most successful political bloggers and found that in their credentials they are far more similar to the leading



Blogs are playing an increasing important role in the reporting of political news. In 2005, 23-year-old Garrett Graff, who was writing a blog about the news media in Washington, became the first person to receive a White House press pass for the specific purpose of writing a blog. Here, bloggers cover a candidate speech during the 2012 presidential primary campaign.

traditional journalists than to Brian Williams' "Vinny." In particular, the major political bloggers like Markos Moulitsas Zuniga and Hugh Hewitt all have strong analytic training, excellent writing skills, and an encyclopedic knowledge of politics. Hindman concludes that, in fact, blogs have "given a small group of educational, professional, and technical elites new influence in U.S. politics" but "have done far less to amplify the political voice of average citizens."³³

Even if blogs remain largely a tool of elites, they have on occasion made it possible for citizens without journalistic credentials to get the media to pay attention to stories that might otherwise be ignored and to serve as watchdogs over the media. For example, when Dan Rather and CBS News ran a story in 2004 about documents that allegedly showed that George W. Bush had shirked his duties with the National Guard in the 1970s, a number of bloggers quickly raised questions concerning their authenticity. The bloggers were ultimately proven right, and CBS News apologized for running the story.

□ Private Control of the Media

As we have seen, America has a rich diversity of media sources. One of the main reasons that this has long been the case is that journalism has long been big business in the United States, with control of virtually all media outlets being in private hands. Only a relatively small number of TV stations are publicly owned in America,

and these PBS stations play a minimal role in the news business, attracting very low ratings. In contrast, in many other countries major TV networks are owned by the government. In Canada, the most prominent stations are part of the state-run network (the Canadian Broadcasting Company); this is the case in most European countries as well.

Because of private ownership of the media and the First Amendment right to free speech, American journalists have long had an unfettered capacity to criticize government leaders and policies. In established democracies where major networks are government owned, government ownership is not supposed to inhibit journalists from criticizing the government because the journalists are assured autonomy. However, in some countries, like China, that do not have democratic systems, the media—newspapers as well as television—are typically government enterprises and have to carefully avoid any criticism of the government. In countries where freedom of the press is restricted, journalists may work in fear of physical threats, imprisonment, and even being murdered. Their offices can be searched at any time or their work confiscated, and their stories must be cleared by government censors.

Although the American media are independent when it comes to journalistic content, they are totally dependent on advertising revenues to keep their businesses going. Public ownership means that the media can serve the public interest without worrying about the size of their audience; private ownership means that getting the biggest possible audience is the primary—indeed, sometimes the only—objective. This focus on audience is exacerbated by the fact that media in America today tend to be part of large conglomerates. Consider, for example, the major television networks. The Disney Corporation bought ABC, General Electric acquired NBC, Viacom (a conglomerate that owns many entertainment companies, including Blockbuster, Paramount Pictures, MTV, and Simon & Schuster) took over CBS, and CNN became part of Time Warner. In the newspaper business, **chains**, such as Gannett, Knight-Ridder, and Newhouse, control newspapers that together represent over 80 percent of the nation's daily circulation.³⁴

This increasing profit orientation has had repercussions for American journalism and, specifically, political reporting. For example, the major television networks once had bureaus all over the world; however, these foreign bureaus became a target for cost cutting, as they were expensive to operate and surveys showed that the public was not much interested in news from overseas (except for periods when American troops are involved in major combat, such as in Iraq in 2003). Similarly, foreign coverage in newspapers has been dropped off precipitously as newspapers have to cut their costs in light of declining revenues. Priya Kumar's study of a set of major newspapers found that the total number of foreign news stories in these newspapers declined by over 50 percent between 1985 and 2010.³⁵ As we shall see in the following section, striving for profits greatly shapes how the news is reported in America.

chains

Groups of newspapers published by media conglomerates and today accounting for over four-fifths of the nation's daily newspaper circulation.

Why It Matters to You

Media as a Business

In his classic book *Understanding Media*, Marshall McLuhan coined the famous phrase "The medium is the message." By this, McLuhan meant that the way we communicate information can be more influential than the information itself. In the United States, news is a commodity controlled by the media, not a public service. Therefore, the news media have far more incentive to make their reports interesting than informative about policy issues. The public would probably be exposed to more policy information were it not for this incentive system.

Reporting the News

7.3

List the major criteria that determine which news stories receive the most media attention.

7.1

7.2

7.3



Explore on MyPoliSciLab
Simulation: You Are a
Newspaper Editor

7.4

beats

Specific locations from which news frequently emanates, such as Congress or the White House. Most top reporters work a particular beat, thereby becoming specialists in what goes on at that location.

7.5

7.6

trial balloons

Intentional news leaks for the purpose of assessing the political reaction.



As journalism students will quickly tell you, news is what is timely and different. It is a man biting a dog, not a dog biting a man. An often-repeated speech on foreign policy or a well-worn statement on the need for immigration reform is less newsworthy than an odd episode. The public rarely hears about the routine ceremonies at state dinners, but when President George H. W. Bush threw up all over the Japanese prime minister in 1992, the world's media jumped on the story. Similarly, when Howard Dean screamed wildly to a crowd of supporters after the 2004 Iowa caucuses, the major networks and cable news channels played the clip over 600 times in the following four days, virtually obliterating any serious discussion of the issues. In its search for the unusual, the news media can give its audience a peculiar, distorted view of events and policymakers.

Millions of new and different events happen every day; journalists must decide which of them are newsworthy. A classic look into how the news is produced can be found in Edward J. Epstein's *News from Nowhere*,³⁶ which summarizes his insights from a year of observing NBC's news department from inside the organization. Epstein found that in the pursuit of high ratings, news shows are tailored to a fairly low level of audience sophistication. To a large extent, TV networks define news as what is entertaining to the average viewer. A dull and complicated story would have to be of enormous importance to get on the air; in contrast, relatively trivial stories can make the cut if they are interesting enough. Leonard Downie, Jr. and Robert Kaiser of the *Washington Post* argue that entertainment has increasingly pushed out information in the TV news business. They write that the history of TV news can be summarized in a couple sentences:

⋮ As audiences declined, network executives decreed that news had to become more
⋮ profitable. So news divisions sharply reduced their costs, and tried to raise the
⋮ entertainment value of their broadcasts.³⁷

Regardless of the medium, it cannot be emphasized enough that news reporting is a business in America. The quest for profits shapes how journalists define what is newsworthy, where they get their information, and how they present it. And the pursuit of types of news stories that will attract more viewers or readers also leads to certain biases in what the American public sees and reads.

□ Finding the News

Americans' popular image of correspondents or reporters somehow uncovering the news is accurate in some cases, yet most news stories come from well-established sources. Major news organizations assign their best reporters to particular **beats**—specific locations from which news often emanates, such as Congress. For example, in covering military conflicts, the majority of TV news stories usually originate from correspondents posted at the White House, Pentagon, and State Department beats.

Politicians depend on the media to spread certain information and ideas to the general public. Sometimes they feed stories to reporters in the form of **trial balloons**, information leaked to see what the political reaction will be. For example, a few days prior to President Clinton's admission that he had had an "inappropriate relationship" with Monica Lewinsky, top aides to the president leaked the story to Richard Berke of the *New York Times*. The timing of the leak was obvious; the story appeared just before Clinton had to decide how to testify before Kenneth Starr's grand jury. When

the public's reaction was that it was about time he admitted this relationship, it was probably easier for him to do so—at least politically.

Journalists and politicians have a symbiotic relationship, with politicians relying on journalists to get their message out and journalists relying on politicians to keep them in the know. When reporters feel that their access to information is being impeded, complaints of censorship become widespread. During the Gulf War in 1991, reporters' freedom of movement and observation was severely restricted. After the fighting was over, 15 influential news organizations sent a letter to the secretary of defense complaining that the rules for reporting the war were designed more to control the news than to facilitate it.³⁸ Largely because of such complaints, during the 2003 military campaign to oust Saddam Hussein the Pentagon “embedded” about 500 reporters with coalition fighting forces, thus enabling them to report on combat activity as it happened. The result was an increased ability to transmit combat footage. A content analysis by Farnsworth and Lichter found that 35 percent of major TV network stories contained combat scenes compared to just 20 percent in 1991.³⁹ The public response to this new form of war reporting was largely positive.⁴⁰

Although journalists are typically dependent on familiar sources, an enterprising reporter occasionally has an opportunity to live up to the image of the crusading truth seeker. Local reporters Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward of the *Washington Post* uncovered important evidence about the Watergate break-in and cover-up in the early 1970s. Ever since the Watergate scandal, news organizations have regularly sent reporters on beats to expose the uglier side of government corruption and inefficiency, and, as discussed earlier, journalists have seen such reporting as among their important roles.

There are many cases of good investigative reporting making a difference in politics and government. For example, in 1997, the *New York Times* won a Pulitzer Prize for its in-depth reports on how a proposed gold-mining operation threatened the environment of part of Yellowstone National Park. When President Clinton vacationed at nearby Jackson Hole, he decided to go up and see the mine because he had been reading about it in the *New York Times*. Soon afterward, the project was stopped, and the government gave the owners of the property a financial settlement. In 1999, the *Chicago Tribune* documented the experiences of numerous Illinois men sentenced to death who had been convicted on questionable evidence or coerced into confessing. Soon after the series was published, the governor of Illinois suspended all executions in the state. And in 2007, a reporter with the *Birmingham News* won a Pulitzer Prize for his exposure of cronyism and corruption in Alabama's two-year college system, resulting in the dismissal of the chancellor and other corrective action.

□ Presenting the News

Once the news has been “found,” it has to be neatly compressed into a 30-second news segment or fit in among other stories and advertisements in a newspaper. If you had to pick a single word to describe news coverage by the news media, it would be *superficial*. “The name of the game,” says former White House Press Secretary Jody Powell, “is skimming off the cream, seizing on the most interesting, controversial, and unusual aspects of an issue.”⁴¹ Editors do not want to bore or confuse their audience. TV news, in particular, is little more than a headline service. According to former CBS anchor Dan Rather, “You simply cannot be a well-informed citizen by just watching the news on television.”⁴²

Except for the little-watched but highly regarded *NewsHour* on PBS and ABC's late-night *Nightline*, analysis of news events rarely lasts more than a minute. Patterson's study of campaign coverage found that only skimpy attention was given to the issues during a presidential campaign. Clearly, if coverage of political events

sound bites

Short video clips of approximately 10 seconds. Typically, they are all that is shown from a politician's speech on the nightly television news.

during the height of an election campaign is thin, coverage of day-to-day policy questions is even thinner. Issues such as reforming the Medicare system, adjusting eligibility levels for food stamps, and regulating the financial services industry are highly complex and difficult to treat in a short news clip. A careful study of media coverage of Bill and Hillary Clinton's comprehensive health care proposal in 1993–1994 found that the media focused much more on strategy and who was winning the political game than on the specific policy issues involved.⁴³ President Obama faced exactly the same problem in his battle to reform America's health care system in 2009–2010, frequently admonishing the press, "This isn't about me. This isn't about politics."

Ironically, as technology has enabled the media to pass along information with greater speed, news coverage has become less thorough.⁴⁴ High-tech communication has helped reporters do their job faster but not necessarily better. Newspapers once routinely reprinted the entire text of important political speeches; now the *New York Times* is virtually the only paper that does so—and even the *Times* has cut back sharply on this practice. In place of speeches, Americans now usually hear **sound bites** of about 10 seconds or less on TV. The average length of time that a presidential candidate was given to talk uninterrupted on the TV news has declined precipitously from 43 seconds in 1968 to just 9 seconds in 2008.⁴⁵ As you can see in "America in Perspective: The Length of Candidate Sound Bites in Four Countries," sound bites are not that much longer in other established democracies.

Many politicians have expressed frustration with sound-bite journalism. Even in the 1970s, for example, President Jimmy Carter told a reporter that

... it's a strange thing that you can go through your campaign for president, and you have a basic theme that you express in a 15- or 20-minute standard speech . . . but the traveling press—sometimes exceeding 100 people—will never report that speech to the public. The peripheral aspects become the headlines, but the basic essence of what you stand for and what you hope to accomplish is never reported.⁴⁶

Sound-bite journalism has meant both that politicians are unable to present the issues and that they are able to avoid the issues. Why should politicians work to build a carefully crafted case for their point of view when a catchy line will do just as well? And as Walter Cronkite wrote, "Naturally, nothing of any significance is going to be said in seven seconds, but this seems to work to the advantage of many politicians. They are not required to say anything of significance, and issues can be avoided rather than confronted."⁴⁷

Indeed, a series of studies of TV news reporting of presidential elections over the last two decades has found the coverage wanting in both quantity and quality. Farnsworth and Lichter's content analysis of the 1988 to 2008 campaigns concludes that "the networks consistently focused on the horse race, shortchanged matters of substance, and accentuated the most negative aspects of the campaign trail, and in so doing failed to provide an accurate and fair reflection of the presidential campaigns."⁴⁸ Notably, Farnsworth and Lichter absolve the candidates from any blame

Why It Matters to You

The Increasing Speed of News Dissemination

When Samuel Morse sent the first telegraph message from the U.S. Capitol building, he tapped out a question, "What hath God wrought?" The answer back was "What is the news from Washington?" Ever since, the transmission of news via electronic means has become faster and faster. As a result, over time there has been less and less time for deliberative action to deal with long-term problems, and the political agenda has come to focus more on the here and now.

The Length of Candidate Sound Bites in Four Countries

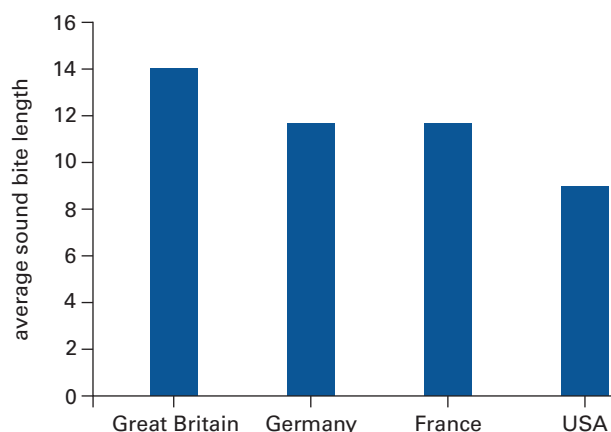
During the period from 2000 to 2007, media researchers in four countries conducted a cross-national study of TV coverage of the final four weeks of national election campaigns. Among the topics they looked at was the average length of uninterrupted time that a party's national leader was given to speak on the newscasts. One might think that in European countries with public ownership of the networks, as in Britain with the BBC, major politicians would be given longer to make their case than in the strictly commercial-driven media in the United States. However, as you can see in the figure, the sound bites for politicians in Germany, France, and Great Britain are not that much longer than those for American politicians.

Thus, two factors appear to be at work in advanced industrialized democracies. First, technological advancements in editing have made it quite easy to cut political

statements into small tidbits. And, second, networks usually feel that, to keep their audience, brief sound bites are best—lest people change to another channel.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. Do you think the difference between 15 second sound bites in Great Britain and 10 seconds in the United States is significant? Try timing a political statement into 15 seconds and then cutting it down to 10 seconds to see if crucial information is lost by such a cut.
2. Do you think the TV networks in these countries are shortchanging the voters by presenting them with such short sound bites? Why or why not?



SOURCE: Frank Esser, "Dimensions of Political News Cultures: Sound Bite and Image Bite News in France, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States." *The International Journal of Press/Politics* (2008): 401–428.

for this state of affairs. Their careful analysis of what candidates present in their speeches, campaign ads, and Web sites finds plenty of in-depth discussion of policy issues; the problem they point to is that the media all too frequently fail to pass this on to the public, or at best present only small morsels of what the candidates are trying to get across.

The problem of getting the networks to cover serious issues in-depth scarcely goes away once a president assumes office. During the Cold War, presidents could routinely obtain coverage for their speeches on the three major networks anytime they requested it. Now, with the networks able to shunt the coverage to CNN and other cable news outlets, it is easy for them to say "no" to even the president. In May 2000, for example, Bill Clinton was rebuffed when he asked for time on ABC, NBC, and CBS to address U.S.–China relations. "Are you crazy? It's sweeps month!" was one of the responses.⁴⁹ In September 2009, Fox opted to show an episode of *So You Think You Can Dance* instead of Obama's address to Congress about health care.

□ Bias in the News

Some have argued that political reporting is biased in favor of one point of view—most often that the media have a liberal bias. There is limited evidence to support this charge of a liberal bias. In four comprehensive surveys of American journalists conducted between 1971 and 2002, David Weaver and his colleagues consistently found that reporters were more likely to classify themselves as liberal than the general public. For example, in 2002, 40 percent of journalists surveyed said they leaned to the left compared to only 25 percent who leaned to the right.⁵⁰ However, the vast majority of studies have found that most reporting is not systematically biased toward a particular ideology or party.

That reporting typically reflects little explicit ideological bias does not mean that it is uninfluenced by reporters' backgrounds and assumptions. Thus, former CBS News reporter Bernard Goldberg argued in his best-selling book *Bias* that “real media bias comes not so much from what party they attack. Liberal bias is the result of how they see the world.”⁵¹ According to Goldberg (who, it should be noted, is an outspoken conservative), on social issues like feminism, gay rights, and welfare the nightly news clearly leans to the left, shaped by the big-city environment in which network reporters live. He asks, “Do we really think that if the media elites worked out of Nebraska instead of New York; and if they were overwhelmingly social conservatives instead of liberals ... do we really think that would make no difference?”⁵²



The clearest and most consistent bias in the news is the focus on sensational stories. When Jerry Sandusky (a former Penn State assistant football coach, shown here) was arrested on sex abuse charges, the media gave far more coverage to this story than to stories going on at the time that involved complex issues, such as the European debt crisis, the debate over health care, or unrest in the Middle East.

The overriding bias, however, is not an ideological bias but, rather, as we have seen, a bias toward stories that will draw the largest audience. Bernard Goldberg also writes, “In the United States of Entertainment there is no greater sin than to bore the audience. A TV reporter could get it wrong from time to time. He could be snippy and snooty. But he could not be boring.”⁵³ Surveys show that people are most fascinated by, and most likely to follow, stories involving conflict, violence, disaster, or scandal, as is reflected in the data in Table 7.2. Such stories have the drama that brings in big audiences.

Television is particularly biased toward stories that generate good pictures. Seeing a **talking head** (a shot of a person’s face talking directly to the camera) is boring; viewers will switch channels in search of more interesting visual stimulation. For example, during an unusually contentious and lengthy interview of George H. W. Bush by Dan Rather concerning the Iran-Contra scandal in the 1980s, CBS’s ratings actually went

talking head

A shot of a person’s face talking directly to the camera. Because such shots are visually unstimulating, the major networks rarely show politicians talking for very long.

TABLE 7.2 STORIES CITIZENS HAVE TUNED IN AND TUNED OUT

Since 1986, the monthly survey of the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press has asked Americans how closely they have followed major news stories. As one would expect, stories involving disaster or human drama have drawn more attention than have complicated issues of public policy. A representative selection of their findings is presented here. The percentage in each case is the proportion who reported following the story “very closely.”

The explosion of the space shuttle Challenger in 1986	80%
Terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon	74%
Impacts of hurricanes Katrina and Rita	73%
Los Angeles riots in 1992	70%
1987 rescue of baby Jessica McClure from a well	69%
School shootings at Columbine High School in Colorado	68%
Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990	66%
2010 earthquake in Haiti	60%
Start of hostilities against Iraq in 2003	57%
Supreme Court decision on flag burning	51%
Killing of Osama bin Laden in a raid by U.S. forces	50%
Passage of Obama’s health care reform bill in 2010	49%
Arrest of O. J. Simpson	48%
Obama’s decision to send 30,000 additional troops to Afghanistan	43%
Controversy over whether Elián González must return to Cuba	39%
2000 presidential election outcome	38%
A sex abuse scandal involving Penn State football coach Joe Paterno	34%
Impeachment trial of President Clinton in the Senate	31%
Prescription drug benefit added to the Medicare program	25%
Confirmation of Sonia Sotomayor to the Supreme Court	22%
Obama’s decision to reject the Keystone oil pipeline	22%
Jack Abramoff’s admission that he bribed members of Congress	18%
2010 Supreme Court decision allowing corporations and unions to pay for ads about political candidates	18%
Ethnic violence in the Darfur region of Sudan	16%
Passage of the Communications Deregulation Bill	12%
Violent protests in Tibet against the Chinese government in 2008	12%

SOURCE: Pew Research Center for the People & the Press.

down as people tired of watching two talking heads argue.⁵⁴ In contrast, ratings can be increased by, say, ambassadors squaring off in a fistfight at the United Nations, a scene CBS showed three times in one day—without once discussing the cause of the fight.⁵⁵ The result of this kind of bias, political scientist Lance Bennett points out, is that “the public is exposed to a world driven into chaos by seemingly arbitrary and mysterious forces.”⁵⁶

The News and Public Opinion

7.4 Analyze the impact the media has on what policy issues Americans think about.

How does the news media’s depiction of a threatening, hostile, and corrupt world shape Americans’ political opinions and behaviors? This question is difficult to answer, as the effects of the news media can be difficult to accurately assess. One reason is that it is hard to separate the media from other influences. When presidents, legislators, and interest groups—as well as news organizations—are all discussing an issue, it is not easy to isolate the opinion changes that come from political leadership from those that come from the news. Moreover, the effect of one news story on public opinion may be trivial but the cumulative effect of dozens of news stories may be important.

For many years, students of the subject tended to doubt that the media had more than a marginal effect on public opinion. The “minimal effects hypothesis” stemmed from the fact that early scholars were looking for direct impacts—for example, whether the media affected how people voted.⁵⁷ When the focus turned to how the media affect *what Americans think about*, the effects began to appear more significant. In a series of controlled laboratory experiments, Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder subtly manipulated the stories participants saw on the TV news.⁵⁸ They found that they could significantly affect the importance people attached to a given problem by splicing a few stories about it into the news over the course of a week. Iyengar and Kinder do not maintain that the networks can make something out of nothing or conceal problems that actually exist. But they do conclude that “what television news does, instead, is alter the priorities Americans attach to a circumscribed set of problems, all of which are plausible contenders for public concern.”⁵⁹ Subsequent research by Miller and Krosnick has revealed that agenda-setting effects are particularly strong among politically knowledgeable citizens who trust the media. Thus, rather than the media manipulating the public, they argue that agenda setting reflects a deliberate and thoughtful process on the part of sophisticated citizens who rely on what they consider a credible institutional source of information.⁶⁰

Nonetheless, this agenda-setting effect can have a range of far-reaching consequences. First, by increasing public attention to specific problems, the media influence the criteria by which the public evaluates political leaders. When unemployment goes up but inflation goes down, does public support for the president increase or decrease? The answer could depend in large part on which story the media emphasized. The fact that the media emphasized the country’s slow economic growth in 1992 rather than the good news of low inflation and interest rates was clearly instrumental in setting the stage for Bill Clinton’s ousting the incumbent president, George H. W. Bush, that year. Similarly, the emphasis on the deteriorating economic situation in 2008 rather than the good news about the success of the troop surge in Iraq was clearly an advantage for Obama and a disadvantage for McCain.

The media can even have a dramatic effect on how the public evaluates specific events by emphasizing one event over others. When, during a 1976 presidential debate, President Ford incorrectly stated that the Soviet Union did not dominate Eastern

Europe, the press gave substantial coverage to Ford's misstatement, and this coverage had an impact on the public. Polls showed that most people did not realize the president had made an error until the press told them so. Afterward, the initial assessment that Ford had won the debate shifted, as voters expressed increased concern about his competence in foreign policymaking.⁶¹ Similarly, the media's focus on misstatements by Al Gore during the first presidential debate of 2000 had an impact on public opinion. In the days immediately following this debate, the percentage who thought that Gore had beaten Bush declined markedly.⁶²

Much remains unknown about the effects of the media and the news on American political opinion and behavior. Enough is known, however, to conclude that the media are a key political institution. The media control much of the technology that in turn controls much of what Americans believe about politics and government. For this reason, it is important to look at the American policy agenda and the media's role in shaping it.

Policy Entrepreneurs and Agenda Setting

7.5

Explain how policy entrepreneurs employ media strategies to influence the public agenda.

Someone who asks you “What’s your agenda?” wants to know something about your priorities. Governments, too, have agendas. John Kingdon defines **policy agenda** as “the list of subjects or problems to which government officials, and people outside of government closely associated with those officials, are paying some serious attention at any given time.”⁶³ Interest groups, political parties, individual politicians, public relations firms, bureaucratic agencies—and, of course, the president and Congress—are all pushing for their priorities to take precedence over others. Health care, education, unemployment, and immigration reform—these and scores of other issues compete for attention from the government.

Political activists depend heavily on the media to get their ideas placed high on the governmental agenda. Political activists are often called **policy entrepreneurs**—people who invest their political “capital” in an issue (as an economic entrepreneur invests capital in an idea for making money). Kingdon says that policy entrepreneurs can “be in or out of government, in elected or appointed positions, in interest groups or research organizations.”⁶⁴ Policy entrepreneurs’ arsenal of weapons includes press releases, press conferences, and letter writing; convincing reporters and columnists to tell their side; trading on personal contacts; and, in cases of desperation, resorting to staging dramatic events. Such activities are often shrugged off as self-serving and mere public relations ploys. Political scientist Patrick Sellers firmly disagrees with this view in his study of strategic communication in Congress. He concludes, “Promotional campaigns are a way to discursively organize public deliberation, allowing political actors to present their arguments and for others to understand and evaluate these arguments.”⁶⁵

The media are not always monopolized by political elites; the poor and downtrodden have access to them too. Civil rights groups in the 1960s relied heavily on the media to tell their stories of unjust treatment. Many believe that the introduction of television helped to accelerate the movement by showing Americans—in the North and South alike—just what the situation was.⁶⁶ Protest groups have learned that if they can stage an interesting event that attracts the media’s attention, at least their point of view will be heard. Radical activist Saul Alinsky once dramatized the plight of one neighborhood by having its residents collect rats and dump them on the mayor’s front lawn. The story was one that local reporters could hardly resist. In 2002, graduate

policy agenda

The issues that attract the serious attention of public officials and other people actively involved in politics at the time.

policy entrepreneurs

People who invest their political “capital” in an issue. According to John Kingdon, a policy entrepreneur “could be in or out of government, in elected or appointed positions, in interest groups or research organizations.”

students at the University of California, Irvine, camped out in tents in the campus park to protest the lack of investment in on-campus housing. The prime organizer, a teaching assistant for an introduction to American government course, issued press releases and made calls to news directors urging them to come down and take a look. Soon after several stations put the sorry scene on TV, the university administration gave in to the graduate students' demands.

Conveying a long-term, positive image through the media is more important than gaining media coverage of a few dramatic events. Policy entrepreneurs, in or out of government, depend on goodwill and good images. Thus, groups, individuals, and even countries sometimes turn to public relations firms to improve their image and their ability to peddle their issue positions.⁶⁷

Understanding the Mass Media

7.6

Assess the impact of the mass media on the scope of government and democracy in America.



he media act as key linkage institutions between the people and the policymakers and have a profound impact on the political policy agenda. Bernard Cohen goes so far as to say, “No major act of the American Congress, no foreign adventure, no act of diplomacy, no great social reform can succeed unless the press prepares the public mind.”⁶⁸ If Cohen is right, then the growth of government in America would have been impossible without the media having established the need for it.

□ The Media and the Scope of Government

The media's watchdog function helps to keep politicians in check. Notably, this is one aspect of the media's job performance that Americans consistently evaluate positively. For over two decades, the Pew Research Center for People & the Press has consistently found that a clear majority of the public has said that press criticism of political leaders does more good than harm. In 2011, a Pew Research Center poll found that 58 percent said that press criticism of political leaders is worth it because it keeps leaders from doing things that should not be done, while 25 percent believed criticism keeps political leaders from doing their jobs.⁶⁹ Reporters themselves consider exposing officeholders to be an essential role of the press in a free society. They often hold disparaging views of public officials, seeing them as self-serving, hypocritical, lacking in integrity, and preoccupied with reelection. Thus, it is not surprising that journalists frequently see a need to debunk public officials and their policy proposals.

As every new policy proposal is met with media skepticism, constraints are placed on the scope of what government can do. The watchdog orientation of the press can be characterized as neither liberal nor conservative but reformist. Reporters often see their job as crusading against foul play and unfairness in government and society. This focus on injustice in society inevitably encourages enlarging the scope of government. Once the media identify a problem in society—such as poverty, inadequate medical care for the elderly, or poor education for certain children—reporters usually begin to ask what the government is doing about it. Could it be acting more effectively to solve the problem? What do people in the White House and Congress (as well as state and local government) have to say about it? In this way, the media portray government as responsible for handling almost every major problem. Although skeptical of what politicians say and do, the media report on America's social problems in a manner that often also encourages government to take on more and more tasks.

□ Individualism and the Media

More than any other development in the past century, the rise of television broadcasting has reinforced and furthered individualism in the American political process. Candidates are now much more capable of running for office on their own by appealing to people directly through television. Individual voters can see the candidates “up close and personal” for themselves, and they have much less need for political parties or social groups to help them make their decisions.

Television finds it easier to focus on individuals than on groups. As a result, candidate personality is more important than ever. In part because of this focus on individuals, TV has also affected the relative amount of coverage accorded to the three branches of government. Whereas there are 535 members of Congress, there is only one president. Doris Graber’s study of nightly news broadcasts in 2008–2009 found that 65 percent of the coverage devoted to the three branches was devoted to the president as compared to 29 percent for Congress. The Supreme Court, which does not allow TV cameras to cover its proceedings and whose members rarely give interviews, is almost invisible on TV newscasts, receiving a mere 6 percent of the coverage.⁷⁰

□ Democracy and the Media

As Ronald Berkman and Laura Kitch remark, “Information is the fuel of democracy.”⁷¹ Widespread access to information could be the greatest boon to democracy since the secret ballot, yet most observers think that the great potential of today’s high-tech media has yet to be realized. Noting the vast increase in information available through the news media, Berkman and Kitch state, “If the sheer quantity of news produced

Point to Ponder

Studies have found that the focus of television news in recent years has shifted toward more human interest stories, with the result being less coverage of national and international politics.

Do you think TV news producers are just responding to what Americans want? And, if so, do you think that is what TV news *should* be doing?



“Responding to viewer sentiment, we have eliminated world news and expanded our entertainment and sports news.”

7.1

7.2

7.3

7.4

7.5

7.6

greater competency in the citizenry, then we would have a society of political masters.”⁷² Yet, this is clearly not the case. The rise of the “information society” has not brought about the rise of the “informed society.”

Whenever the media are criticized for being superficial, their defense is to say that this is what people want. Network executives remark that if people suddenly started to watch in-depth shows such as PBS’s *NewsHour*, then they would gladly imitate them—if people wanted serious coverage of the issues, they would be happy to provide it. They point out that they are in business to make a profit and that, to do so, they must appeal to the maximum number of people. As Matthew Kerbel observes, “The people who bring you the evening news would like it to be informative *and* entertaining, but when these two values collide, the shared orientations of the television news world push the product inexorably toward the latter.”⁷³ It is not their fault if the resulting news coverage is superficial, network executives argue; blame capitalism or blame the people—most of whom like news to be more entertaining than educational. Thus, if people are not better informed in the high-tech age, it is largely because they do not care to hear about complicated political issues. In this sense, one can say that the people really do rule through the media.

Review the Chapter



Listen to **Chapter 7** on **MyPoliSciLab**

The Mass Media Today

- 7.1** Describe how American politicians choreograph their messages through the mass media, p. 227.

Politicians stage media events for the primary purpose of getting attention from the media. These events are artfully stage-managed to present the intended message. Campaign commercials are also carefully crafted to convey specific images and information.

The Development of Media Politics

- 7.2** Outline the key developments in the history of mass media and American politics, p. 229.

Newspapers were long the dominant media through which Americans got their news. But ever since the emergence of television they have been on the decline. The Internet has further accelerated the decline of newspaper reading; newspapers have thus far failed to establish profitability for their online editions. The nightly network news broadcasts on CBS, NBC, and ABC were the #1 means by which Americans got their news from the 1960s through the 1980s. But ever since the emergence of cable and cable news they have seen their audiences shrink, as American television has moved from the broadcasting to the narrowcasting era. The Internet provides more access to political information than ever possible before. How much typical citizens will take advantage of these opportunities remains to be seen. But certainly campaigns and political activists have been able to use the Internet to organize for political action and to get specially targeted messages out.

Reporting the News

- 7.3** List the major criteria that determine which news stories receive the most media attention, p. 242.

The media define “news” largely as events that are unusual and out of the ordinary. Because of economic pressures, the media are biased in favor of stories with high drama that will attract people’s interest instead of extended analyses of complex issues.

The News and Public Opinion

- 7.4** Analyze the impact the media has on what policy issues Americans think about, p. 248.

The media are instrumental in setting the American political agenda—that is, the issues that get seriously addressed by politicians. What issues Americans think about is much influenced by which issues the media choose to cover. It has often been said that the media are like a searchlight, bringing one episode and then another out of darkness and into the public eye.

Policy Entrepreneurs and Agenda Setting

- 7.5** Explain how policy entrepreneurs employ media strategies to influence the public agenda, p. 249.

Policy entrepreneurs seek to influence the policy agenda by getting the media to pay attention to the issues that they are particularly concerned with. They employ a variety of strategies to obtain media coverage, including press releases, press conferences, and letter writing. Sometimes they will resort to staging dramatic events that are so interesting and unusual that reporters can hardly resist covering them.

Understanding the Mass Media

- 7.6** Assess the impact of the mass media on the scope of government and democracy in America, p. 250.

The media’s role as a watchdog over government sometimes constrains expansions of the scope of government by fomenting skepticism about what government can accomplish. On the other hand, media crusades against injustices sometimes serve to encourage government to take on increased responsibilities. The media’s superficial coverage of policy issues is criticized by many democratic theorists. Yet, members of the media argue in their own defense that they are only providing the sort of coverage of politics that draws the biggest audiences.

Learn the Terms



high-tech politics, p. 227
mass media, p. 227
media event, p. 228
press conferences, p. 229
investigative journalism, p. 229
print media, p. 231

electronic media, p. 231
narrowcasting, p. 234
selective exposure, p. 237
chains, p. 241
beats, p. 242
trial balloons, p. 242

sound bites, p. 244
talking head, p. 247
policy agenda, p. 249
policy entrepreneurs, p. 249

Test Yourself



1. The emergence of media events has contributed to each of the following trends EXCEPT

- a. increasing news coverage of candidates as individuals.
- b. increasing politicians' control over the political agenda.
- c. increasing the importance of image for presidents.
- d. increasing negativity in American political campaigns.
- e. All of the above are true.

2. In recent years, most presidential election campaign television advertisements have been negative.

True _____ False _____

3. How important are the news media today for presidents who hope to govern successfully? In answering this question, discuss efforts by recent presidents to choreograph their messages through media.

4. The trend toward more negative and cynical news coverage began during

- a. the Great Depression.
- b. World War II.
- c. the Korean War.
- d. the Vietnam War.
- e. the Persian Gulf War.

5. Those who watch the news on television tend to be more engaged in politics than those who read the news.

True _____ False _____

6. The Internet appears to be increasing public interest in political news.

True _____ False _____

7. Evaluate the shift from broadcasting toward narrowcasting. What impact has this shift had on the quality of political journalism? What impact do you think the trend toward narrowcasting will have on political participation and awareness?

8. Compare and contrast private and public media. How might the business model of privately owned media both contribute to and detract from the free flow of information to American citizens? In your opinion, does public ownership of the media provide a better model? Why or why not?

9. Which of the following factors best account(s) for what is considered newsworthy?

- a. a story's high entertainment value
- b. a story's high informational value
- c. a story's high sophistication value
- d. a story's high political value
- e. all of the above

10. News coverage of political campaigns pays relatively little attention to policy issues.

True _____ False _____

11. Evaluate the symbiotic relationship between the press and government. How might this relationship promote positive coverage of the government? How might it encourage critical news coverage instead? Provide specific examples in your answer.

12. It is commonly thought that media favor one political point of view in their coverage of politics. Does social science research support this belief? Why or why not? If bias does exist in news coverage, how does it influence news coverage?

13. Each of the following characterizes how media affect public opinion EXCEPT

- a. media affect public opinion to a significant extent.
- b. media affect which issues the public finds to be important.
- c. media affect the public's evaluation of elected officials.
- d. media affect knowledgeable citizens' policy agendas.
- e. All of the above are true.

- 14.** How do the media affect public evaluation of different political events? Provide specific examples to support your answer.
- 15.** The nation's policy agenda is best defined as the problems that
- the president addresses in the annual State of Union address.
 - interest groups lobby on.
 - congressional hearings are held about.
 - the Supreme Court addresses in the cases that it accepts.
 - government officials are paying some serious attention to.
- 16.** Who are policy entrepreneurs and how do they seek to affect the policy agenda through the media? Give some examples. What appears to most contribute to their success?

- 17.** Television's emphasis on the individual has the effect of encouraging greater news coverage of
- the Supreme Court.
 - interest groups.
 - Congress.
 - ordinary voters.
 - the presidency.
- 18.** How does the media's role as watchdog affect the scope of government? Why do you think the public supports this role of the news media?
- 19.** Explain the phrase "information is the fuel of democracy" and evaluate its accuracy in the context of today's high-tech media society. If the media fall short in "fueling" democracy, is this a problem and what do you think can be done? Are the media justified in giving people what they want? Defend your answer.

Explore Further

WEB SITES

www.journalism.org

The Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism regularly posts studies about the mass media at this site.

www.appcpenn.org

The Annenberg Public Policy Center conducts studies that analyze the content of TV coverage of politics.

www.usnpl.com

Listings for newspapers all over the country, including Web links, where available.

www.cmpa.com

The Center for Media and Public Affairs posts its studies of the content of media coverage of politics at this site.

www.livingroomcandidate.org

A great collection of classic and recent political commercials from 1952 through 2012.

FURTHER READING

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Stroud, Natalie Jomini. *Niche News: The Politics of News Choice*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. An examination of how people often deliberately select news sources to match their own views, and what difference such choices make to the workings of American democracy.

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