THE MEDIA AND AMERICAN POLITICS

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At their final number in the 2004 Super Bowl half-time show, Justin Timberlake and Janet Jackson sang "Rock Your Body." At the conclusion of this song, Timberlake removed part of Jackson's costume, exposing her left breast to 90 million viewers.[1] This incident, described by some as a "wardrobe malfunction,"[2] created substantial controversey. CBS, the network broadcasting the super bowl, claimed no advance knowledge of what occurred,[3] but was still widely criticized for not exercising more control over the half-time entertainment. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC), which regulates broadcast media, received more than 200,000 viewer complaints in eight days,[4] and FCC Chair Michael Powell stated, "We have a very angry public on our hands."[5]

Some thought too much was made of this fleeting moment, either because they did not think it so outrageous or because they thought some of the commercials aired during the Super Bowl were even more offensive. Referring to complaints that parents were blindsided by the event and citing the offensive commercials preceding it, Frank Rich of *The New York Times* said, "What signal were these poor, helpless adults waiting for before pulling their children away from the set? Apparently nothing short of a simulated rape would do."[6] Others responded that what happened in the half-time show was not all that different than what appears with some regularity on MTV or other cable networks.

Moreover, the same content on cable would not have been subject to indecency regulations. Jane D. Brown, a media researcher at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and editor of *Sexual Teens, Sexual Media,* said, "For some children, this won't


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TIME LINE

THE MEDIA AND AMERICAN POLITICS

1780s	Founders use the press to advocate ratification of the Constitution; Hamilton, Jefferson, and others establish partisan newspapers
1820s	Press begins to shift its appeal toward larger masses of less educated people
1923	Coolidge delivers first broadcast State of the Union address over the radio
1933	FDR begins "fireside chats," the first informal communications over mass medium
1934	Federal Communications Commission (FCC) established to regulate rapidly expanding radio media
1947	Truman's State of the Union address is televised
1960	First televised presidential debates benefit Kennedy campaign
1963	Two largest television networks at the time, CBS and NBC, expand evening news to 30 minutes
1971	Supreme Court rules against censorship—*The New York Times* publishes the "Pentagon Papers"
1982	*USA Today* created by Gannett Corporation as national newspaper
1987	Fairness doctrine repealed
1992	Bill Clinton plays saxophone on late-night television
1998	Internet site "Drudge Report" breaks story of Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky
2004	CBS admits error in reports of President Bush's service record in the National Guard

have been anything out of the ordinary. If they're watching MTV, dating shows, or reality programming, this is pretty much what they see all the time."[7] One rationale for the different standards for indecency in broadcast and cable television is that broadcast television uses the airwaves and is free to the recipient, while cable broadcasts are purchased by consumers who willingly pay for them.

The controversy about the Super Bowl ads and halftime show led to action by the FCC and Congress. The FCC imposed a fine of $27,500 on each of the twenty stations owned by CBS, resulting in a total fine of $550,000. This fine was well below the $1.2 million fine levied against Fox for indecency shown on *Married by America*. The FCC did not fine CBS stations now owned by the network. It also reversed its previous ruling on Bono's use of an obscenity during the Golden Globes.[8] Subsequent to the Super Bowl incident, the House of Representatives passed legislation authorizing the FCC to impose fines up to $500,000 for indecency.[9] The media also responded to the controversy. Clear Channel Communications removed "shock jock" Howard Stern from its programming in some major markets.[10] This controversy about indecency in the media illustrates the delicate balance between free speech and broadcasters' use of the public airwaves.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE MEDIA ON POLITICS

The media, in particular the print media, have been called the "fourth estate," and the "fourth branch of government."[11] Evidence that the media influence our culture and politics is plentiful. The **mass media**—newspapers and magazines, radio, television (broadcast, cable, and satellite), the Internet, films, recordings, books, and electronic communication—are the means of communication that reach the mass public.[12] The **news media** are the mass media vehicles that emphasize the news, although the distinctions between entertainment and news

For over forty years, Americans have been getting their news primarily from television. Whenever there is a crisis, most people turn first to television for information. No event in recent history has done more to underscore the importance of television as the primary source of news in contemporary U.S. society than the terrorist attacks that took place on September 11, 2001.

mass media
Means of communication that reach the mass public, including newspapers and magazines, radio, television (broadcast, cable, and satellite), films, recordings, books, and electronic communication.

news media
Media that emphasizes the news.

are sometimes blurred. News programs often have entertainment value, and entertainment programs often convey news. Programs in this latter category include TV newsmagazines such as *60 Minutes* and *Dateline,* and talk shows with hosts like Larry King, Oprah Winfrey, Hannity and Colmes, and Jon Stewart.

By definition, the mass media disseminate messages to a large and often heterogeneous audience. Because they must have broad appeal, their messages are often simplified, stereotyped, and predictable. The mass media make money by appealing to large numbers of people. But do large audiences equal political clout? Two factors are important in answering this question: the media's pervasiveness and their role as a linking mechanism between politicians and government officials and the public.

Where do Americans get their news? Until 1960, most people got their news from newspapers. Today, although many people use several sources, they rely primarily on television. Whenever there is a crisis—from the assasination of John F. Kennedy to the *Challenger* explosion to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001—people are glued to their TV sets.

The Internet is becoming an increasingly important source of news for Americans, taking its place alongside print, radio, and television. The number of Americans going online for election news is growing dramatically and promises to become even more important as candidates and issue advocates pay increasing attention to the Internet as

PEOPLE & POLITICS *Making a Difference*

SEAN HANNITY

For more than a decade talk radio has been dominated by conservatives like Rush Limbaugh and more recently by Bill O'Reilly and Sean Hannity. In 2004, liberals responded by promoting Al Franken's new radio show as an alternative to the conservatives. An example of a personality who has used talk radio and cable television successfully is Sean Hannity.

Hannity attended college at New York University intermittenly because of limited resources but became interested in radio in part through his involvement with college radio stations. He placed a "Job Wanted" ad in the *R&R,* a weekly newspaper covering the music industry, billing himself as "the most talked about college radio host in America."* His professional involvement in radio began with a station in Huntsville, Alabama. He later moved to Atlanta, where his strong local ratings attracted the attention of WABC in New York City and the Fox News Channel. He moved to New York, where he launched "Hannity and Colmes" on the Fox News Channel (cable television), reaching an estimated audience of over one million.† Hannity also hosts *The Sean Hannity Show,* which is carried by 400 radio stations, reaching an estimated audience of 12 million.† *Talker Magazine* has rated his radio program the second most listened to talk radio show in America.§ Hannity is also the author of two books, *Let Freedom Ring,*‖ and *Deliver Us From Evil.*¶

Hannity is outspoken and aggressive in his interviews and interactions with those who call into his program. He has interviewed most leading conservatives and Republicans like Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld. Hannity also frequently observes that liberals like Bill Clinton have refused to appear on his program. Evidence of the impact of conservative media personalities like Sean Hannity is found in the push by liberals to have their own talk shows. Comedian Al Franken in his first broadcast described this sentiment when he said, "The radical right wing has taken over the White House, Congress, and increasingly, the courts . . . and most insidiously, the airwaves."**

* www.hannity.com/story.php?content=/about_hannity.
† Ibid.
† Ibid.
§ Ibid.
‖ Sean Hannity, *Let Freedom Ring: Winning the War of Liberty over Liberalism* (Regan Books, 2002).
¶ Sean Hannity, *Deliver Us from Evil: Defeating Terrorism, Despotism, and Liberalism* (Regan Books, 2004).
** Allessandra Stanley, "Talk Network Makes Debut, with Rage a No-Show," *The New York Times,* April 1, 2004, p. A20.

a way to get their messages to the voting public.[13] Using the Internet as a news source permits the user to obtain information on only the topics or issues desired and from multiple sources. It also means the user can access the news from multiple locations and at convenient times. It also means that some people may turn to unreliable sources, which are plentiful on the Internet.

The Pervasiveness of Television

Television has changed American politics more than any other invention. Most Americans watch some kind of television news every day. The average American watches television four and one-half hours a day, and most homes have more than two sets.[14] Television provides instant access to news from around the country and the globe, permitting citizens and leaders alike to observe firsthand the capture of Saddam Hussein, a kidnapping in Southern California, or a refugee crisis in Indonesia. This instant coverage increases the pressure on world leaders to respond quickly to crises, permits terrorists to gain widespread coverage of their actions, and elevates the role played by the president in both domestic and international politics.

The growth of around-the-clock cable news and information shows is one of the most important developments in recent years. Until the late 1980s, the network news programs on CBS, NBC, and ABC captured more than 90 percent of the audience for television news at set times in the morning and early evening hours. Owing to the rise of cable television and the advent of the Internet, the broadcast networks now attract only about 40 percent of the viewing public,[15] and half of the public are regular viewers of CNN, CNBC, MSNBC, or Fox News.[16]

Satellites, cable television, computers using Internet search engines like Google or Yahoo, and DVDs make vast amounts of political information available 24 hours a day. These technologies eliminate the obstacles of time and distance and increase the volume of information that can be stored, retrieved, and viewed. They have also reduced the impact of single sources of broadcast or cable news. Competition from cable stations for viewing has put pressure on broadcast networks to remain profitable, which has meant reduced budgets for news coverage and a tendency to look for ways of boosting the entertainment value of broadcast news.

One of the biggest changes in American electoral politics of the last half-century is that most voters now rely more on television commercials for information about candidates and issues and less on news coverage. Although debates and speeches by candidates generate coverage, the more pervasive battleground for votes is radio and TV ads. As a result, electoral campaigns now focus on image and slogans rather than on substance. Successful candidates must be able to communicate with voters through this medium. To get their message across to TV audiences, politicians increasingly rely on media advisers to define their opponent as well as themselves. These consultants also seek positive news coverage, but in many congressional campaigns, news coverage is fleeting.

Candidates are not the only ones who have used television and radio to communicate electioneering messages to voters. Political parties and interest groups in competitive elections between 1996 and 2002 have expended approximately as much as candidates in competitive races urging voters to reject one candidate or support another. The use of party soft money, which was unlimited, and "issue advocacy," which was not only unlimited but undisclosed, allowed noncandidate entities to become major factors in the most competitive contests for Congress and in presidential battleground states.[17] **Issue advocacy**, which was a way for individuals and groups to avoid contribution limitations and disclosure requirements, was curtailed somewhat by the campaign finance reforms that took effect in 2004, aimed at broadcast ads aired during the period before elections. To voters, the messages from the parties and interest groups were indistinguishable from the messages from the candidates,[18] except that the tone was generally more negative.[19]

Passage of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA) in 2002 and the Supreme Court's subsequent upholding of the act substantially changed the way parties and interest groups behaved in 2004. BCRA banned soft-money-funded electioneering by

issue advocacy
Promoting a particular position or an issue paid for by interest groups or individuals but not candidates. Much issue advocacy is often electioneering for or against a candidate and, until 2004, had not been subject to any regulation.

parties, which had been the largest noncandidate source of broadcast and cable ads. BCRA also banned corporations and unions from using their general funds for electioneering communications, defined as "broadcast ads" that mention a federal candidate by name, occur within 30 days of a primary election and 60 days of a general election, and are targeted to a particular electorate (50,000 people or more in the district or state where the named candidates are running). Consistent with past Supreme Court decisions, BCRA exempted from this limitation nonprofit organizations that do not receive corporate or union funds. Examples of groups like this that were able to run ads within the 60 days before the 2004 election are the League of Conservation Voters and NARAL Pro-Choice America. While these groups were active in 2004, others were even more active, in part because the Federal Election Commission did not strictly define what constituted a political committee under BCRA. Examples of very active groups include the Media Fund, America Coming Together, Progress for America, and Swift Boat Veterans for Truth.

The amount of television news devoted to politics has been declining and now constitutes less than one minute per half-hour broadcast.[20] A major effort to get local television stations to devote a few minutes to candidate debate in their nightly local news ended up with stations averaging 45 seconds a night, or as one observer put it, just enough time to "let candidates clear their throats."[21] Stations also often ignored campaigns in 2002 with a majority (56 percent) of local news broadcasts airing in the weeks leading up to the election making no mention of the campaign.[22]

In large urban areas, it is rare for viewers to see stories about their member of Congress, in part because there are several congressional districts in that media market. Newspapers do a better job of covering politics and devote more attention to it than television stations. The decline in news coverage of elections and voting, especially on television, has only amplified the importance of political advertising on television, through the mail, and on the telephone.

In referendum elections, advertising is the most important source of information in voter decision making.[23] The campaign finance reforms enacted in 2002 will likely only increase the amount of issue advocacy, especially through the mail and on the telephone. As previously noted, BCRA bans issue advocacy on television or radio that mentions a candidate by name in the two months before a general election or one month before a primary election. But it does not limit what groups can do through the mail, on the phone, or in person. In 2004, a wide range of groups communicated directly with voters through the mail, on the phone, and in person. This "ground war" had been growing in importance before passage of BCRA but the reforms accelerated the groups' use of these techniques. In battleground states or districts, voters were often canvassed by groups and then received mail and phone calls reinforcing the message in the initial call. Even more effective are face-to-face conversations, especially with people the voter knows.

The Persistence of Radio

Television and the newer media have not displaced radio. On the contrary, radio continues to reach more American households than television does. Only one household in 100 does not have a radio, compared with four in 100 without a TV.[24] More than 9 out of 10 people listen to the radio every week, and 8 out of 10 do so every day.[25] Many Americans consider the radio an essential companion when driving. Americans get more than "the facts" from radio: They also get analysis and opinion from their favorite commentators and talk show hosts.

The Continuing Importance of Newspapers

Despite vigorous competition from radio and television, Americans still read newspapers. Daily newspaper circulation has been declining for the past 30 years to about 55 million nationwide—or just under one copy for every five people.[26] The circulation figures for newspapers reflect a troubling decline in readership among younger persons: About 30 percent fewer young people read newspapers on a regular basis.[27]

In addition to metropolitan and local newspapers, we now have national ones. Created in 1982 by the Gannett Corporation, *USA Today,* with a circulation of more than

Extensive use of computers by young children has left them vulnerable to sexual predators and commercial fraud, opening the issue of whether government regulation is needed. Parental supervision remains the best protection.

2.1 million, recently replaced *The Wall Street Journal* as America's top-circulating newspaper.[28] *The Wall Street Journal,* with a circulation of over 2 million, has long acted as a national newspaper specializing in business and finance. *The New York Times* has a national edition that is read by more than one million people.

The Internet

From its humble beginnings as a Pentagon research project in the 1960s,[29] the World Wide Web has blossomed into a global phenomenon. There are now more than one billion documents on the Web,[30] and more than 15 million unique domains have been registered worldwide. Many people mistakenly think the Internet and the World Wide Web are the same thing. The truth is that the Internet was the original "giant international plumbing system" for accessing information. It permits information to travel between computers. The World Wide Web is now the most popular way of using the Internet because it transmits pictures, data, and text. However, the WWW incorporates all of the Internet services and much more.

The Internet opens up resources for citizens in dramatic ways. One study found that nearly half of Americans go online to search for news on a particular topic; somewhat smaller proportions go online for updates on stock quotes and sports scores. For about 20 percent of people, the Internet is a primary source of news.[31] Internet users can also interact with other people or politicians about politics through electronic mail and chat rooms. Younger people, including teenagers, use the Internet extensively for schoolwork and nearly three in four prefer it to the library.[32]

Candidates are now using the Web for fund raising. Once a candidate gains recognition, as Howard Dean did, it is possible to raise money quickly and inexpensively via the Web. In fact, in the third quarter of 2003, Dean broke the record for money raised in a quarter by a Democratic presidential candidate, a record he would set again the following quarter. Internet fundraising was integral to his success; half of the estimated $40 million he raised in 2003 came through the Internet.[33] Ironically, Dean himself didn't use a computer until 1998 and had initially refused to have a government e-mail address.[34] John Kerry also found the Internet to be a boon to his fundraising in the general election campaign. The success of the parties and candidates in Internet fundraising may significantly change the way politics is financed. As people gained confidence in making credit card transactions via the Internet, it has opened up the possibility of people contributing to parties and candidates in this way.

The Web provides an inexpensive way to communicate with volunteers, contributors, and voters and promises to become an even larger component of campaigns in the future, as illustrated by several presidential and congressional campaigns in 2004. Candidates maintain home pages where voters can learn about office seekers or ballot referendums.

THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE AMERICAN NEWS MEDIA

The controversy over the 2004 Super Bowl half-time show discussed earlier in this chapter itself became a major media story. Media coverage of this incident demonstrates the public's tremendous appetite for instant news and analysis, at least when it comes to a crisis or major controversy. Americans spend on average an hour a day consuming news, and the older they are, the more time they devote to it.[35] Yet people are quick to criticize the media. Writes journalist James Fallows, "Americans have never been truly fond of their press. Through the last decade, however, their disdain for the media establishment has reached new levels. Americans believe that the news media have become too arrogant, cynical, scandal-minded, and destructive."[36]

How often have you or your friends blamed the media for being biased, criticized the frenzy that surrounds a particular story, or denounced the "if it bleeds, it leads" mentality of nightly television news? Yet the content and style of news coverage is driven by market research in which viewers and readers are asked what they want to see reported

and how they want it presented. Advertising revenue is directly linked to the number of readers or viewers a media outlet has.

Media bashing has become something of a national pastime. Americans blame the media for everything from increased tension between the races, biased attacks on public officials, sleaze and sensationalism, increased violence in our society, and for being more interested in making money than in conveying information. Many in the media even agree with these charges.[37] But complaints about the media may simply be a case of criticizing the messenger in order to avoid dealing with the message. Comments like "It's the media's fault that we have lost our social values" or "The media's preoccupation with the private lives of politicians turns Americans off to politics" are overly broad assertions. Americans tend to blame far more problems on the media than are warranted.

There are also occasional examples of fabrication or plagiarism, as in the case of Jayson Blair of *The New York Times,* who plagiarized stories including the writing from a Texas newspaper about the family of Iraqi prisoner of war Jessica Lynch[38]; and Jack Kelley, a top reporter for *USA Today* who fabricated parts of numerous stories including one article that made him a Pulitzer Prize finalist.[39] Cases like these have prompted these newspapers and the media in general to evaluate editorial review and standards of integrity, but they also provoked criticism of the media.

The news media has changed dramatically over the course of U.S. history. At the time of the ratification of the Constitution, newspapers consisted of a single sheet, often printed irregularly by store owners to hawk their services or goods. Newspapers rarely stayed in business more than a year, due to delinquent subscribers and high costs.[40] But the framers understood the important role the press should play as a watchdog of politicians and government, and they included freedom of the press in the Bill of Rights.

Political Mouthpiece

The new nation's political leaders, including Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson, recognized the need to keep voters informed. Political parties as we know them did not exist, but the active role of the press in supporting the Revolution had fostered a growing awareness of the political potential of newspapers. Hamilton recruited staunch Federalist John Fenno to edit and publish a newspaper in the new national capital of Philadelphia. Jefferson responded by attracting Philip Freneau, a talented writer and editor and a loyal Republican, to do the same for the Republicans. (Jefferson's Republicans later became the Democratic party.) The two papers became the nucleus of a network of competing partisan newspapers throughout the nation.

Although the two newspapers competed in Philadelphia for only a few years, they served as a model for future partisan newspapers. The early American press served as a mouthpiece for political leaders. Its close connection with politicians and political parties offered the opportunity for financial stability—but at the cost of journalistic independence.


MAINE EXPLOSION CAUSED BY BOMB OR TORPEDO?

Capt. Sigsbee and Consul-General Lee Are in Doubt—The World Has Sent a Special Tug, With Submarine Divers, to Havana to Find Out—Lee Asks for an Immediate Court of Inquiry—Capt. Sigsbee's Suspicions

The New York World a day after

As the nineteenth century progressed, literacy grew among the U.S. masses and more people began to get their news from newspapers. The popularization of the print media forced politicians and public officials to devote growing attention to their relationship with the press.

Financial Independence

During the Jacksonian era of the 1820s and 1830s, the right to vote was extended to all white adult males through the elimination of property qualifications. The press began to shift its appeal away from elite readers and toward large masses of less educated and less politically interested readers. The rising literacy rate reinforced this popularization of newspapers. These two forces—increased political participation by the common people and the rise of literacy among Americans—began to alter the relationship between politicians and the press.

Some newspaper publishers began to experiment with a new way to finance their newspapers. They charged a penny a paper, paid on delivery, instead of the traditional annual subscription fee of $8 to $10, which was beyond the ability of most readers to pay. The "penny press," as it was called, expanded circulation and put more emphasis on advertising, enabling newspapers to become financially independent of the political parties.

The changing finances of newspapers also affected the definition of news. Before the penny press, all news was political—speeches, documents, editorials—directed at politically interested readers. The penny press reshaped the definition of news as it sought to appeal to less politically aware readers with human interest stories and reports on sports, crime, public trials, and social activities.

"Objective Journalism"

By the early decades of the twentieth century, many journalists began to argue that the press should be independent of the political parties. *New York Tribune* editor Whitelaw Reid eloquently expressed this sentiment: "Independent journalism! That is the watchword of the future in the profession. An end of concealments because it would hurt the party; an end of one-sided expositions . . .; an end of assaults that are not believed fully just but must be made because the exigency of party warfare demands them."[41]

Journalists began to view their work as a profession and established professional associations with journals and codes of ethics. This professionalization of journalism reinforced the notion that journalists should be independent of partisan politics. Further strengthening the trend toward objectivity was the rise of the wire services, such as the Associated Press and Reuters, which deliberately remained politically neutral so as to attract more customers.

The Impact of Broadcasting

Radio and television nationalized and personalized the news. People could follow events as they were happening and not have to wait for the publication of a newspaper. From the 1920s, when radio networks were formed, radio carried political speeches, campaign advertising, and coverage of political events such as national party conventions.[42] Radio provided a means to bypass the screening of editors and reporters, since politicians could now speak directly to listeners. It also increased interest in national and international news because events outside a listener's local area could be followed as if one were actually there.

President Franklin Roosevelt used radio with remarkable effectiveness. Before 1933, most radio speeches were formal orations, but Roosevelt spoke to his audience on a personal level, seemingly in one-on-one conversations. These "fireside chats" established a standard still followed today. When Roosevelt began speaking over the microphone, he would visualize a tiny group of average citizens in front of him. Roosevelt "would smile and light up as though he were actually sitting on the front porch or in the parlor with them."[43]

Television added a dramatic visual dimension, which contributed to rising audience interest in national events and permitted viewers to witness lunar landings and the aftermath of political assassinations, as well as more mundane news events. By 1963, the two largest networks at the time, CBS and NBC, had expanded their evening news programs from 15 to 30 minutes. Today news broadcasting has expanded to the point that many local stations provide 90 minutes of local news every evening as well as a half-hour in the morning and at noon. Programs such as *20/20* and other newsmagazine shows are among the most popular in the prime-time evening hours.

Cable television brought round-the-clock news coverage. During the Clinton impeachment hearings and the 2000 Florida ballot-counting controversy, American cable news was watched at home and around the world for its instantaneous coverage. C-SPAN now provides uninterrupted coverage of congressional deliberations, the courts, and state and local governments.

Franklin D. Roosevelt was the first president to recognize the effectiveness of radio to reach the public. His fireside chats were the model for later presidents.

Investigatory Journalism

Contemporary news reporters do more than convey the news; they investigate it, and their investigations often have political consequences. Notable examples of influential investigatory reporters include Seymour Hersh of *The New York Times,* who exposed what became known as the *Pentagon Papers,* revealing how the United States became involved in the Vietnam War; Robert Woodward and Carl Bernstein of *The Washington Post,* who

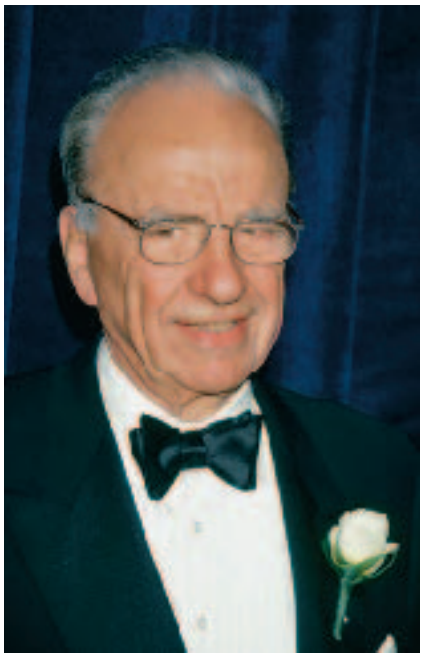
played an important role in uncovering the Watergate conspiracy; Nina Totenberg of National Public Radio, whose reporting on sexual harassment charges against Clarence Thomas helped force the Senate Judiciary Committee to extend the hearings on his confirmation to the U.S. Supreme Court; and Michael Isikoff of *Newsweek,* who broke the story of Bill Clinton's alleged perjury involving sexual misconduct with Monica Lewinsky.

Media Conglomerates

If a few owners corner the market on newspapers and television stations, is the free flow of information to the public endangered? As in other sectors of the economy, media companies have merged and created large conglomerates. When television was in its infancy, radio networks and newspapers were among the first to purchase television stations. These mergers established cross-ownership patterns that persist today. The Gannett Corporation, for example, owns 101 daily newspapers and 22 television stations and cable television systems—assets that provide news coverage to nearly 18 percent of the United States.[44] The *Chicago Tribune* substantially expanded its reach of newspapers and television stations by purchasing Times-Mirror, publisher of the *Los Angeles Times* and ten other newspapers, 22 TV stations, four radio stations, and a growing online business.[45]

Local firms used to own the local newspapers, radio, and television stations. Today large conglomerates, some of them foreign, have acquired ownership of many newspapers and broadcasting stations. Rupert Murdoch, founder of the Fox network, owns 35 television stations in the United States, 20th Century-Fox, HarperCollins publishers, and *TV Guide,* which has the largest magazine circulation in America. Murdoch's News Corporation recently purchased DirecTV and has moved its corporate headquarters to the United States.[46] The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and the courts are reinforcing the trend toward media conglomeration by relaxing and striking down regulations that limit cable and television network ownership by the same company.[47] Congress responded by passing resolutions opposing the more lax FCC ownership limitations, prompting a compromise between the Bush administration and Congress increasing the maximum population reachable by conglomerates but not as much as the FCC had proposed.[48] An appeals court has ruled against even these modified relaxations, however, calling them "arbitrary and capricious."[49]

When reporting national news, local outlets depend heavily on news that is gathered, edited, and distributed by national organizations like the Associated Press. As a result, some people contend that information these days is more diluted, homogenized, and moderated than it would be if the newspapers and broadcast stations were locally owned and the news was gathered and edited locally.[50]



Australian-born Rupert Murdoch owns the Fox network, dozens of U.S. television stations, magazines, publishing organizations, and movie studios.

Regulation of the Media

Regulation of the broadcast media has existed in some form since their inception. Because of the limited number of television and radio frequencies, the national government oversees matters like licensing, financing, and even content. Once regulation required "fairness" in news programming.[51] As written into law and interpreted by the FCC, the **fairness doctrine** imposed an obligation on radio and television license holders to ensure that differing viewpoints were presented regarding controversial issues or persons. With the advent of cable television and the Reagan administration's antiregulatory campaign, much of the fairness doctrine was repealed in 1987, and the final remnants of it were repealed in 2000. Will broadcasters provide fair and balanced news coverage in the absence of regulation? Proponents of deregulation who pushed for repeal think so.[52]

fairness doctrine
Federal Communications Commission policy that required holders of radio and television licenses to ensure that different viewpoints were presented about controversial issues or persons; largely repealed in 1987.

MEDIATED POLITICS

When dramatic events like the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, occur, we realize the power television has in bringing world events into our lives. Osama bin Laden, the purported mastermind behind the

IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

A LESS THAN FREE PRESS IN RUSSIA

An example of a country struggling to establish a free press is Russia. After the fall of Communism and its state-controlled media, Russia saw multiple print and broadcast media take root. Over time these outlets have declined in number and in the ability to communicate. NTV, an independent television channel, had been critical of President Vladimir Putin, Boris Yeltsin, and the Russian war in Chechnya. Russian government officials, claiming the station was corrupt,[*] took over the channel in 2001. The government appointed Boris Jordan to head NTV after the takeover, only to fire him two years later after the channel had provided extensive coverage of a theater takeover by independence-seeking Chechen terrorists, with the Russian government's aggressive response and resulting loss of life. The moves by Putin's government against NTV have had a chilling impact on stations that are critical of the Putin government.[†] By June 2003, TVS, the last independent national network, went under, but more for financial than political reasons.[‡] Harassment of the media has not been limited to television. The weekly paper *Versiya,* which had reported the death toll to be higher than government reports at the Chechen theater incident and that the gas used to suppress the terrorists had been military and not civilian gas, found its offices ransacked and its computers and servers taken.[§]

Muzzling the media or putting them out of business helped Putin's United Russia Party to monopolize media coverage in the 2003 and 2004 elections, giving Putin's party even more seats in Parliament and reelecting Putin to the presidency. Putin justifies his policies regarding the media as efforts to not allow media moguls to become "king makers."[‖] The difficulties Russia has had in maintaining a free press illustrate the difficulty new democracies encounter as they develop.

[*] "Media Muzzle," *The Economist,* April, 21, 2001.
[†] Erin E. Arvedlund, "News Corp. Said to Seek Russia Satellite T.V.," *The New York Times,* November 10, 2003, p. C2.
[‡] "Unplugged," *The Economist,* U.S. Edition, June 28, 2003.
[§] Christian Caryl and Eve Conant, "The Dead and the Silent," *Newsweek,* November 11, 2002, p. 39.
[‖] "Russia—Looking East," *Campaign,* September 27, 2002, p. 16.

attacks, understood the power of the media both inside and outside the United States, as evidenced by his release of videotapes of himself through the Al-Jazeera network in the Middle East in the weeks and months after the attacks.

The pervasiveness of newspapers, magazines, radio, and television places the individuals who determine what we read, hear, and see in a position of great influence because they can reach so much of the American public so quickly. With a large population scattered over a continent, both the reach and the speed of the modern media elevate the importance of the people in charge of them. The main source of campaign news in 2004 for more than two-thirds of Americans was television (68 percent), a proportion that has held relatively constant since 1992. Newspapers were mentioned as the most important source by 15 percent. All other media trailed these two.[53]

Political parties and interest groups have long been political mediators that help organize the world of politics for the average citizen. Their role is less important today because the media now serve that function and political parties have largely lost control over the nominating process (see Chapters 7 and 9). Greater attention is now given to judging candidates not so much in terms of party affiliation and platform but in terms of character and competence. The press, not the parties, performs this evaluative function.

The news media have also assumed the role of "speaking for the people." Journalists report what "the people" want and think, and then they tell the people what politicians and policy makers are doing about it. Politicians realize how dependent they are on the media for getting their message out to voters, and they are well aware that a hostile press can hurt them. That explains why today's politicians spend so much of their time developing good relations with the press.

The Media and Public Opinion

The ability of television to present images and communicate events has influenced American public opinion. Television footage of the violence done to blacks during the civil rights revolution of the 1950s and 1960s made the issue more real and immediate.

News coverage of the war in Vietnam galvanized the antiwar movement in the United States because of the horrible images news shows brought into people's homes. The testimony of White House staff before the Senate Watergate and later House Judiciary committees intensified the crisis of confidence in the Nixon administration. The repeated television coverage of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon left an indelible impression on all who saw them.

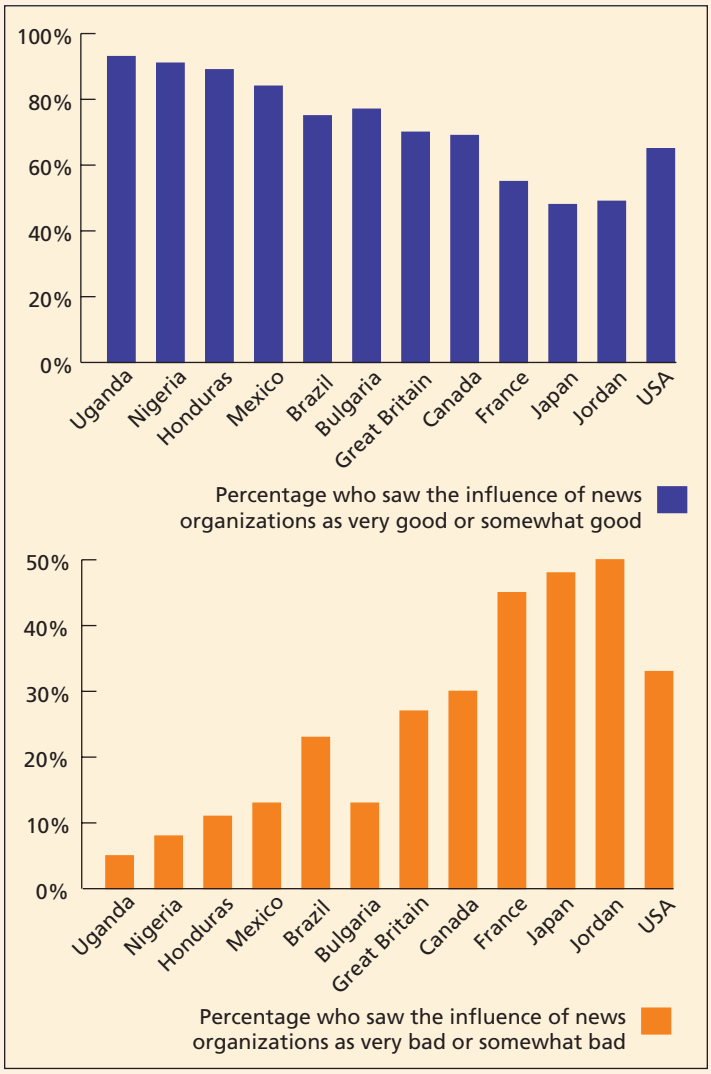
For a long time, analysts tended to play down the influence wielded by the media in American politics relative to the influence wielded by political leaders. The impact of Franklin D. Roosevelt's fireside chats came to symbolize the power of the politician over that of the news editor. Roosevelt spoke directly to his listeners over the radio in a way and at a time of his own choosing, and no network official was able to block or influence that direct connection. President John Kennedy's use of the televised press conference represented a similar direct contact with the public. President Ronald Reagan was nicknamed the "Great Communicator" because of his ability to talk persuasively and often passionately about public policy issues with the people through television.

GLOBAL *Perceptions*

QUESTION: Is the influence of news organizations very good, somewhat good, somewhat bad, or very bad in your country?

How do people in other countries perceive the role of news organizations and the media? The Pew Global Attitudes Project asked people in many countries the question that begins this box. Africa is the region with the most positive assessment of the news media. In contrast, the Middle East is the region most likely to believe that the news media has a "very bad" influence on their countries. The proportion saying news organizations and the media have a very bad influence on their country ranged from a low of 2 percent in Asia and 3 percent in Africa to 10 percent in the Middle East. More than one in four Middle Easterners saw the news media as a very bad influence or somewhat bad influence.

SOURCE: Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "2002 Global Attitudes Survey: Final Top-line Results," p. T-34.



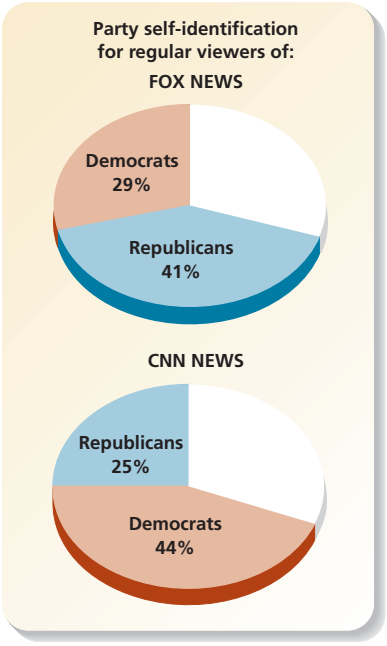


FIGURE 10–1 Partisanship and Preferred News Source.
SOURCE: *The New York Times,* July 18, 2004.

However, broadcasters and journalists are now so important to the political process that elected officials and politicians spend considerable time trying to learn how to use them to their advantage. Presidential events and "photo opportunities" are planned with the evening news and its format in mind.[54] Members of Congress use Capitol Hill recording studios to tape messages for local television and radio stations. White House press briefings are frequently included in the evening news.

Factors That Limit Media Influence on Public Opinion

People are not just empty vessels into which politicians and journalists pour information and ideas. How people interpret political messages depends on a variety of factors: political socialization, selectivity, needs, and the individual's ability to recall and comprehend the message.

POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION The media, particularly television, although not as important as family, play a role in socializing, influencing our values and attitudes.[55] The media shape public perceptions and knowledge. Television, with its concreteness and drama, has an emotional impact that print cannot hope to match.[56] Television cuts across age groups, educational levels, social classes, and races. Newspapers provide more detail about the news and often contain contrasting points of view, at least on the editorial pages, that help inform the public.

We develop our political attitudes, values, and beliefs through an education process that social scientists call **political socialization**.[57] (See Chapters 4 and 8 for more detail on this process.) Face-to-face contacts with friends and business associates (*peer pressure*) often have far more impact than the impersonal television or newspaper. Strong identification with a party also acts as a powerful filter.[58] A conservative Republican from Arizona might watch the "liberal eastern networks" and complain about their biased news coverage while sticking to her own opinions. A liberal from New York will often complain about right-wing talk radio, even if he listens to it some nights on the way home from work (see Figures 10–1 and 10–2).

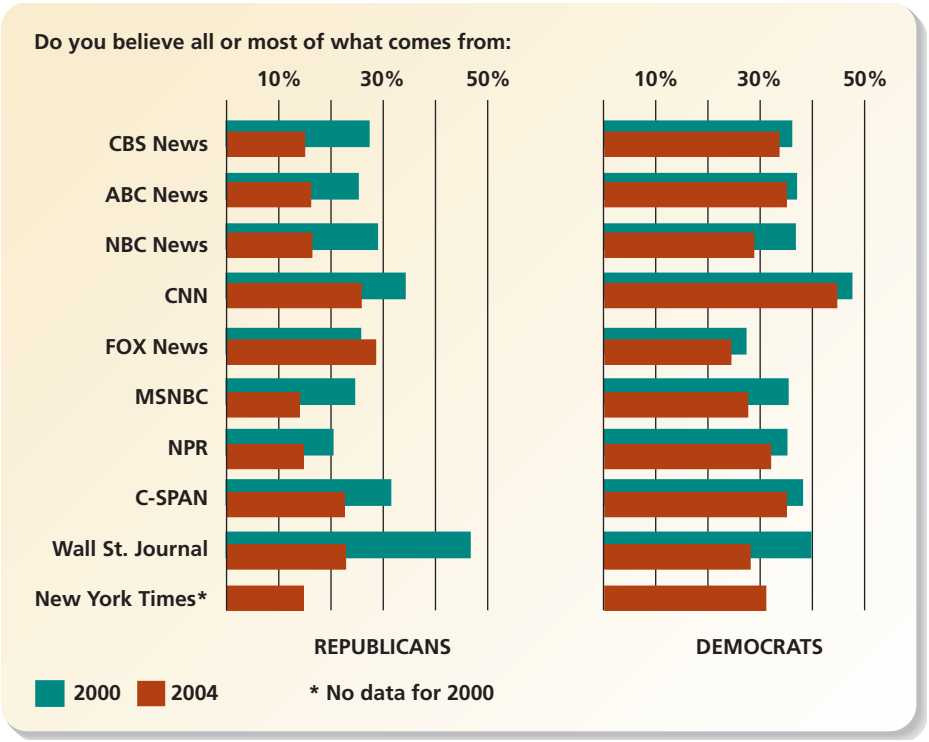


FIGURE 10–2 Partisanship and News Source Credibility.
SOURCE: *The New York Times,* July 18, 2004.

political socialization
The process by which we develop our political attitudes, values, and beliefs.

SELECTIVITY People practice **selective exposure**—screening out messages that do not conform to their own biases. They subscribe to newspapers or magazines that support their views. People also practice **selective perception**—perceiving what they want to in media messages.[59] One dramatic example was the differing reactions of Democrats and Republicans to reports of President Clinton's sexual misconduct with Monica Lewinsky, a former White House intern, and the possibility that he encouraged her to lie under oath. In the first weeks after the story broke, Republicans were four times more likely than Democrats to believe that Clinton had been sexually involved with Lewinsky.[60] More than two-thirds of Republicans and Democrats agreed that Clinton committed perjury before the grand jury, but they had dramatically different opinions on whether Clinton should remain in office. Nearly two-thirds of Republicans wanted Clinton out of office, while 63 percent of Independents and 87 percent of Democrats felt that Clinton should continue as president.[61]

NEEDS People read newspapers, listen to the radio, or watch television for very different reasons, often out of habit or because they want information.[62] People who seek information and cultivate an interest in politics are affected by what they read and see differently from those who use media primarily for entertainment.[63] For those seeking entertainment, gossip about politicians' peccadilloes is more important than those politicians' opinions or voting patterns. Members of the broader audience are also more likely to pay attention to news that directly affects their lives, such as interest rate changes or the price of gasoline.[64]

RECALL AND COMPREHENSION Still another limitation of media influence on public opinion is the extent to which the audience can recall the stories or comprehend their importance. Candidates and officials send out vast amounts of information designed to influence what people think and do, and especially how they vote, but people forget or fail to comprehend much of it.[65] The fragmentary and rapid mode of presentation of television news contributes to the problem. Most television news stories, for example, last less than 90 seconds.

Given the abundance of information available about politics and government, it is not surprising that most people pick and choose which media source—television, radio, newspapers, cable, the Web—they pay attention to and which news stories they consider important.[66] The best predictor of retention of news stories is political interest. People tend to fit today's news stories into their general assumptions or beliefs about government, politicians, or the media itself.

AUDIENCE FRAGMENTATION With the growth of cable television and new media like the Web, the influence of any one media source is weakened. Because people are scattered across a larger number of press outlets and these outlets cover politics in varied ways, the impact of the press will be more disparate. People can now tailor their news to their preferred point of view. In a study of the 2004 election it was observed that "today's fractionalized media environment has taken the heaviest toll on local news, network news, and newspapers."[67] Fragmentation of the media audience tends to counteract the impact of media conglomeration. As media giants move to both cable and broadcast (NBC, CNBC, MSNBC, for example), the trends may converge.

"Hey, do you want to be on the news tonight or not? This is a sound bite, not the Gettysburg Address. Just say what you have to say, Senator, and get the hell off."

Are the Media Biased?

Americans tend to blame the media for lots of things. Conservatives complain, "The media are too liberal." Radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh even once said, "They all just happen to believe the same way. . . . They are part of the same culture as Bill Clinton."[68] Extreme liberals contend that the ruling class controls the mainstream press, and they charge that government propaganda distorts the facts. Conservatives say the press is too liberal in its selection of news covered and the interpretation of events. Liberals point to newspaper endorsements of Republican presidential candidates to support their claim that newspapers are biased in favor of conservative policies and candidates.

selective exposure
The process by which individuals screen out messages that do not conform to their own biases.

selective perception
The process by which individuals perceive what they want to in media messages.

Newspapers, magazines, and television stations are business corporations concerned about profits. They work to boost circulation and ratings and must please their advertisers, sponsors, and stockholders. Reporters and editors pride themselves on impartial reporting of the facts.[69] Yet some liberal critics contend that the media reflect a conservative bias not only in what they report but also in what they choose to ignore. Political scientist Michael Parenti states that journalists "rarely doubt their own objectivity even as they faithfully echo the established political vocabularies and the prevailing politico-economic orthodoxy."[70]

Newspapers and television management go to some lengths to insulate reporters from their advertising and business operations, in part to reduce criticism about favorable treatment of large advertisers or the corporate owners. When the management of the *Los Angeles Times* attempted to foster closer relations between the business and news divisions, it was criticized for insensitivity to this concern.[71] Another internal check on media bias is the fact that news coverage involves many reporters and a host of editors, all of whom have input into what is covered and how it is presented.

Some commentators have suggested that a possible bias flows from the fact that reporters and editors become too friendly with the people and organizations they write about. David Broder of *The Washington Post* voices his concern about the confusion of roles by journalists who have served in government. According to Broder, a line should divide objective journalism from partisan politics, but many members of the print and television media have crossed this line. Broder opposes the idea of journalists' becoming government officials and vice versa.[72] Others argue that journalists with previous government service have close working relationships with politicians and can give us a valuable perspective on government without losing their professional neutrality.

A frequent criticism is the media's alleged political bias, whether liberal or conservative (see Table 10–1). But to whom are these critics referring? To reporters, writers, editors, producers, or owners of TV stations and newspapers? Do they assume that a journalist's personal politics will be translated into biased reporting? And does the public think so? Journalists are usually more liberal than the population as a whole; editors tend to be a bit more conservative than their reporters are; and media owners are more conservative still. Elite journalists—those who work for national news media organizations—tend to share a similar culture: cosmopolitan, urban, upper-class. Their

TABLE 10–1 THE CHANGING FACE OF JOURNALISTS

	Journalists	*Policy Makers*	*Public*
Party Identification			
Democrat	27%	43%	34%
Republican	4	24	28
Independent	55	26	21
Other	5	5	12
Don't Know/Refused	9	2	2
Self-Described Ideology			
Liberal	25%	25%	21%
Moderate	59	52	37
Conservative	6	18	35
Don't Know/Refused	11	5	7

SOURCE: The Kaiser Foundation, *The Role of Polls in Policy Making,* Combined Topline Results, June 2001, p. 27. www.kff.org/kaiserpolls/loader.cfm?url=/commonspot/security/getfile.cfm&PageID=13842.

approach to the events and issues they cover is governed by their common worldview, which may be derived from their professional training.[73] The result, some critics contend, is that elite journalists give greater weight to the side of issues that corresponds to their own version of reality.[74]

One bias of the media that does not have a particular partisan or ideological slant is the bias toward sensationalism. Scandals of all types happen to liberals and conservatives, Republicans and Democrats. Once the province of tabloids like the *National Enquirer,* stories about scandal have recently become commonplace in the mainstream media. For years, the media have seemed to gravitate to stories involving celebrities, sex, or both. From the O. J. Simpson murder trial to the coverage of a missing intern who had been involved in an affair with a congressman, we have seen what some observers have called a media "feeding frenzy."[75] The intense and unrelenting focus on the scandal involving former President Bill Clinton and White House intern Monica Lewinsky is a clear example of the media's fondness for sensational coverage.

Newspapers and television news often set a tone of dissatisfaction with the performance of the national government and cynicism about politics and politicians. A critical tone may be an inevitable element of the mind-set of the press, but to whose benefit does that critical tone work? The media are accused of having an antireligion bias, a bias in favor of young viewers, and a bias fostering continuing crises.[76] The question is not whether the press is biased but whether a press bias—whatever the direction—seeps into the content of the news. The answer to that question is still not settled.

Public Opinion

Two important influences of print and broadcast media on public opinion are *agenda setting* and *issue framing*.

AGENDA SETTING[77] By calling public attention to certain issues, the media help determine what topics will become subjects of public debate and legislation.[78] However, the agenda-setting function of the media is not uniformly pervasive. The audience and the nature of the issue limit it.[79] According to former Vice President Walter Mondale, "If I had to give up . . . the opportunity to get on the evening news or the veto power, . . . I'd throw the veto power away. [Television news] is the President's most indispensable power."[80] Ronald Reagan, more than any president before him, effectively used the media to set the nation's agenda. Reagan and his advisers carefully crafted the images and scenes of his presidency to fit television. Thus television became an "electronic throne."

Communicating through the media works especially when it is natural and unscripted. When President Bush first visited the scene of the demolition of the World Trade Center in New York City, taking a bullhorn, he said, "I can hear you. The rest of the world hears you, and the people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon."[81] This action projected leadership and empathy on the part of the president.

ISSUE FRAMING Politicians, like everybody else, try to frame issues to win arguments, and they try to influence the "spin" the media will give to their actions or issues. Examples abound. Opponents of U.S. intervention in Bosnia tried to portray such action as another Vietnam. Objectors to permanent normal trade relations with China framed the granting of that status as a human rights travesty. When Bill Clinton wanted to forestall a Republican tax cut, he decried the resulting need to dip into the budget surplus to "rescue Social Security." People who favor abortion define the issue as one of freedom of choice; those who oppose it define it as murder. In referendum campaigns, the side that wins the battle of interpreting what the referendum is about wins the election.[82]

In the 2004 election, voters indicated that the Iraq war and terrorism, the economy and jobs, and moral values were the most important issues. All of these issues had received a lot of attention in the media except "moral values," which prompted intense discussion after the election about what people meant by this response. The fact that gay marriage was on the ballot in eleven states and frequently mentioned in the campaign may help explain why moral values was mentioned by one in five voters.

YOU DECIDE

FREE AIR TIME FOR CANDIDATES AND PARTIES?

Should television stations give free air time to candidates and parties during the election season?

An essential part of running for elective office today is purchasing television advertising. In the 2002 elections alone, candidates and political parties spent an estimated one billion dollars communicating with voters through radio and television advertising. Since broadcast stations have access to public airwaves at no fee, some have proposed that they be required to provide free air time to candidates and parties. What do you think? Should television stations be required to give free air time to candidates and parties?

THE MEDIA AND ELECTIONS

News coverage of campaigns and elections is greatest in presidential contests, less in statewide races for governor and U.S. senator, and least for other state and local races. Generally, the more news attention given the campaign, the less likely voters are to be swayed by any one source. Hence news coverage is likely to be more influential in a city council contest than in an election for president or the Senate. For most city elections, there are only one or two sources of information about what candidates say and stand for; for statewide and national contests, there are multiple sources.

Diversification of the news media lessens the ability of any one medium to influence the outcome of elections. Newspaper publishers who were once seen as key figures in state and local politics are now less important because politicians and their media advisers are no longer so dependent on newspapers and other news media to communicate their messages. Candidates can use ads on radio and television, direct mail, phone, the Web, and cable television to communicate with voters. In local contests, or even some larger settings like the Iowa caucuses or the New Hampshire primary, personal contact can also be very important.[83]

Choice of Candidates

The extensive use of television has made looking and sounding good on television much more important. It has also fostered growth in the political consulting industry and made visibility the watchword in politics. Television greatly affects the public's idea of what traits are important in a candidate. A century ago, successful candidates needed a strong pair of lungs; today it is a telegenic appearance, a pleasing voice, and no obvious physical impairments. Back in the 1930s, the press chose not to show Franklin Roosevelt in his wheelchair or using braces, whereas today the country knows every intimate detail of the president's health. The importance of the public's perception of these traits is evident in the ridicule often directed at candidates. In 2004, Kerry was described as "French-looking"[84] and flip-flopping on issues, and Bush as stubborn and frequently smirking as Kerry spoke in the televised debates.

Although the media insist that they pay attention to all candidates who have a chance to win, they also influence who gets such a chance. Consequently, candidates have to come up with creative ways to attract media attention. The late Paul Wellstone, in his 1996 Minnesota Senate campaign, said in his advertisements that he did not have much money to pay for ads, so he would have to talk fast to cram what he had to say into fewer commercials. His witty commercial became a news event itself—it got Wellstone additional coverage.

In another bid for media attention, some candidates in states bordering Canada have organized bus trips to Canada for people to purchase prescription drugs at Canadian prices, which were sharply lower than in the United States. Candidates in both parties have recently made hunting a pastime, in part to reassure voters that they support the Second Amendment. In 2004, John Kerry went duck hunting in camouflage attire one day during the final week of the campaign. House and Sentate candidates have also included in recent campaign literature photos of them shooting rifles.

"I'm still undecided—I like Leno's foreign policy, but Letterman makes a lot of sense on domestic issues."

Campaign Events

Candidates schedule events—press conferences, interviews, and "photo ops"—in settings that reinforce their verbal messages and public image. A much publicized example of such a staged event was President Bush landing on the aircraft carrier USS Lincoln to announce the end of "major combat operations" in Iraq. While the event provided a dramatic backdrop for the president in his flight jacket, a debate ensued about the cost of the carrier remaining at sea an extra day,[85] and, more fundamentally, as the resistance

to American forces in Iraq continued and intensified, Bush's declaration on the Lincoln seemed more and more premature. Many events organized by campaigns fail to receive attention from reporters because of competing news stories and a sense that the events were staged primarily to generate news coverage.

The parties' national conventions used to capture national attention. However, since candidates are now selected in party primaries, the conventions no longer provide much suspense or make news except perhaps over who will be the vice presidential nominee. This is one reason why the networks have dramatically cut back their coverage of presidential nominating conventions. In 1952, the average television set was tuned to the political conventions for 26 hours, or an average of more than three hours a night for the eight nights of convention coverage.[86] During the 2000 presidential conventions, by contrast, the major networks provided only one or two hours of prime-time coverage each evening. Political parties have sought, in vain, to regain audience interest by relying on "movie stars, entertainment routines, and professionally produced documentaries to spice up their conventions."[87]

Technology

Although the expense associated with television has contributed to the skyrocketing costs of campaigning, it has also made politics more accessible to more people. Thanks to satellites, candidates can conduct local television interviews without actually traveling to local studios. Specific voter groups can be targeted through cable television or low-power television stations that reach homogeneous neighborhoods and small towns. Videocassettes with messages from the candidates further extend the campaign's reach.[88] All serious candidates for Congress and governor in 2000 and 2002 made themselves and their positions available through a home page on the World Wide Web.

The Internet and e-mail have primarily been used to reinforce voter preferences or help answer questions more than to reach and persuade more passive citizens. But with the Web, citizens now have the opportunity to interact with each other on a wide range of political topics. In this sense, the Web is something like a town meeting, but without people leaving their homes or offices. In chat rooms on the Internet people express ideas and respond to each other's opinions. Examples of chat rooms include Abortion Chat, Democrat Chat, Environment Chat, Republican Chat, and Congress Chat. Most chat rooms offer group discussions in which anyone in the group can read and send messages, but some chat rooms also permit private messages to be sent. As discussed earlier, the Internet has also become a way for candidates and groups to raise funds.

Younger voters are much more likely to use the Internet to get campaign news than middle aged and older voters. In a study of the 2004 election, nearly three times as many 18- to 29-year-olds said they used the Internet for news (20 percent), compared with only 7 percent of those over age 50. Persons between 30 and 49 years of age were in between, with 16 percent citing the Internet as a source of campaign news. Younger voters also reported a much greater reliance on comedy TV shows as a source of campaign news.[89]

Image Making and Media Consultants

Candidates recognize that their messages about issues are often ignored. The press tends to emphasize goofs and gossip or tension among party leaders. Candidates in turn try to spin the news. Attempts to shape the news and to portray candidates in the best possible light are not new. Presidential campaign sloganeering such as "Tippecanoe and Tyler Too" in 1840, "Abe the Rail Splitter" in 1860, and "I Like Ike" in 1952 conveyed the candidate's image. Radio, television, and the Web have expanded the ability to project

Thinking It Through

Proponents of free air time cite the fact that broadcast stations use public airwaves and that stations therefore have an obligation to provide free air time to candidates as a public service. Broadcasters, they argue, generate over $60 billion a year in advertising revenue.* Proponents of free air time also refer to studies that show how television stations charge candidates and politicians inflated rates to run advertisements in the days before an election. Finally, proponents point to the fact that television stations provide little news of federal elections, making advertising and free air time even more important.

Opponents of free air time argue that the media are already required to charge candidates the lowest rate for that time segment (i.e., prime time between 7 and 10 P.M.). They say the current system provides both sides equal access and forces the candidates and parties to have real support from voters and financial contributors. They argue that the media covers campaigns in sufficient depth and that requiring stations to provide free time will mean they lose viewers or listeners because people will switch stations because they are turned off to politics. Finally, they point out that broadcasters are being unfairly singled out from other means of communicating with voters. Businesses that produce mail, make phone calls, or even cable television would not be forced to provide access to resources for free.

* www.bettercampaign.org/freeairtime/factsheets/sweetheartdeal.pdf.

A candidate's image often takes precedence over that candidate's message in the mass media. This was as true in the mid-nineteenth century as it is today. This is why image makers and media consultants have been in such high demand for so long. On the top, we see a portrait of Abraham Lincoln as "Abe the Rail Splitter." On the bottom, we see George W. Bush riding a mountain bike.

images, and that expansion has in turn affected candidates' vote-getting strategies and their manner of communicating messages. Television is especially important because of the power of the visual image.

Television has contributed to the rise of new players in campaign politics: *media consultants,* campaign professionals who provide candidates with advice and services on media relations, advertising strategy, and opinion polling.[90] For example, candidates regularly receive consultants' advice on what colors work best for them, especially on television. Male U.S. Senators often appear in light blue shirts with red ties, sometimes called "power ties." A primary responsibility of a campaign media consultant is to present a positive image of the candidate and to reinforce negative images of the opponent.

Some media consultants have been credited with propelling candidates to success. Dick Morris was seen as important to Clinton's resurgence after the 1994 congressional election defeats, until he had to resign from the campaign following a personal scandal. Republican consultant Mark McKinnon produced ads for President Bush's 2000 and 2004 campaigns, and John Kerry's media was done by Bob Shrum and Jim Margolis. Both parties have scores of media consultants who have handled congressional and gubernatorial campaigns as well as campaigns over ballot questions. While sometimes credited with helping elect or defeat candidates and referendums, they have also been blamed for the negativity of recent campaigns.

Media consultants have taken over the role formerly played by party politicians. Before World War II, party professionals groomed candidates for office at all levels. Such leaders made judgments about possible candidates on the basis of their chances of victory and observation of the candidates' performance under fire, decisiveness, conviction, political skill, and other leadership qualities. Party professionals advised candidates which party and interest group leaders to placate, which issues to stress, and which topics to avoid.

Today consultants coach candidates about television technique, appearance, and subject matter. Consultants report the results of *focus groups* (small sample groups of people who are asked questions about candidates and issues in a discussion setting) and *public opinion polls,* which in turn determine what the candidate says and does. Some critics allege that political consultants have become a new "political elite" who can virtually choose candidates by determining in advance which men and women have the right images or at least images that can be restyled for the widest popularity.[91] But political consultants who specialize in media advertising and image making realize their own limitations in packaging candidates. As one media consultant put it, "It is a very hard job to turn a turkey into a movie star; you try instead to make people like the turkey."[92]

The Media and Voter Choice

As television has become increasingly important to politics, and as the political parties have been weakened with such reforms as primary elections, news coverage of candidates has taken on added significance. Although some critics think reporters pay too much attention to candidates' personality and background, others say character and personality are among the most important characteristics for readers and viewers to know about. What is not in dispute is the central role the news media play in our democratic process.

horse race
A close contest; by extension, any contest in which the focus is on who is ahead and by how much rather than on substantive differences between the candidates.

THE HORSE RACE A common tendency in the media is to comment on a candidate's position in the polls compared with other candidates—what is sometimes called the **horse race**—than they are about policy issues.[93] "Many stories focus on who is ahead, who is behind, who is going to win, and who is going to lose, rather than examining how and why the race is as it is."[94] Reporters focus on the tactics and strategy of campaigns because they perceive that the public is interested and influenced by such coverage.[95]

The media's propensity to focus on the "game" of campaigns displaces coverage of issues.

NEGATIVE ADVERTISING Political advertising has always contained negative remarks about opponents, but recent campaigns have taken on an increasingly negative tone. A rule of thumb in the old politics was to ignore the charges of the opposition and thus to accord one's rival no importance or standing. That practice has changed as today's candidates trade charges and countercharges.

Voters say they are turned off by the attack style of politics, but the widespread perception among campaign consultants is that negative campaigning works. This seeming inconsistency may be explained by evidence suggesting that campaigns that foster negative impressions of the candidates contribute to lower turnout.[96] Negative advertising may thus discourage some voters who would be inclined to support a candidate (a phenomenon known as *vote suppression*) while reinforcing the inclination of committed supporters to come out to vote.

INFORMATION ABOUT ISSUES In recent elections, the media have experimented with a more issues-centered focus, what has been called *civic journalism*. With funding from charitable foundations, some newspapers have been identifying the concerns of community leaders and talking to ordinary voters and then writing campaign stories from their point of view.[97] Some newspaper editors and reporters disagree with this approach; they believe the media should stick to responding to newsworthy events. Advocates of civic journalism counter that important concerns of the community are often overshadowed by news events like murders and violence.

MAKING A DECISION Newspapers and television seem to have more influence in determining the outcome of primaries than of general elections,[98] probably because voters are less likely to know about the candidates and have fewer clues about how they stand in a primary. By the time of the November general election, however, party affiliation, incumbency, and other factors moderate the impact of media messages. The mass media are more likely to influence undecided voters who, in a close election, can determine who wins and who loses.

ELECTION NIGHT REPORTING Does TV coverage on election night affect the outcome of elections? Election returns from the East come in three hours before the polls close on the West Coast. Because major networks often project the presidential winner well ahead of poll closings in western states, some western voters have been discouraged from voting. As a result, voter turnout in congressional and local elections has been affected. In a close presidential election, however, such early reporting may well stimulate turnout because voters know their vote could determine the outcome. In short, it is only in elections in which one candidate appears to be winning by a large margin that television reporting makes voters believe their vote is meaningless.[99]

At 7:50 P.M. (EST) on election night, November 7, 2000, television networks projected Al Gore as the winner of Florida, but they soon had second thoughts and revoked their announcement. Hours later Fox News projected Bush as winning Florida. The truth was that the vote in Florida was by every measure too close to call, and no network should have called the race. In the days and weeks after the election, the Voter News Service admitted that its Florida sample was flawed, that it underestimated the Florida absentee vote, and that it relied on incomplete actual vote totals. The mistaken projections by the networks were embarrassing. Tom Brokaw of NBC said, "That's not 'an egg' on our faces; that's 'an omelet.' "[100]

In 2002, the media exit polls failed again. On election day, the networks that sponsor the Voter News Service (VNS), which conducts the media exit polling, announced that they would not be releasing exit poll numbers nor would they be projecting winners. Following the 2000 election and the controversy over the Florida exit polling,

VNS invested in new computers and software and developed new models to project winners. They gathered data on election day but did not have confidence in their ability to accurately predict contests. Viewers on election night 2002 thus got what many had wanted, a night with only local exit polling. The absence of exit polling data, however, meant it was hard to assess the national mood and which types of people actually voted.

THE MEDIA AND GOVERNANCE

The press rarely follows the policy process to its conclusion. Rather, it leaves the issue at the doorstep of public officials. By the time a political issue reaches the stages of policy formulation and implementation, the press has moved on to another issue. When policies are being formulated and implemented, decision makers are at their most impressionable, yet the press has little impact at this stage.[101]

Lack of press attention to policy implementation explains in part why we know less about how bureaucrats go about their business than we do about heated legislative debates or presidential scandals. Only in the case of a policy scandal, such as the lax security surrounding nuclear secrets at Los Alamos, does the press take notice. "Most executives would be satisfied with a press strategy of no surprises. All their press officers need do to be doing their job is provide a rudimentary early warning system [for crises] and issue routine announcements."[102]

Some media critics contend that the media's pressuring policy makers to provide immediate answers forces them to make untimely decisions. Foreign policy may be in particular danger from such quick responses:

> If an ominous foreign event is featured on TV news, the president and his advisers feel bound to make a response in time for the next evening news broadcast. . . . If he does not have a response ready by the late afternoon deadline, the evening news may report that the president's advisers are divided, that the president cannot make up his mind, or that while the president hesitates, his political opponents know exactly what to do.[103]

Political Institutions and the News Media

Presidents have become the stars of the media, particularly television, and have made the media their forum for setting the public agenda and achieving their legislative aims. Presidential news conferences command attention (see Table 10–2). Every public activity, both professional and personal, is potentially newsworthy; a presidential illness can become front-page news, as can presidential vacations and family pets.

A president attempts to manipulate news coverage to his benefit. Speeches are used to set the national agenda or spur congressional action. Travel to foreign countries usually boosts popular support at home, thanks to the largely favorable news coverage. Better yet for the president, most coverage of the president—either at home or abroad—is favorable to neutral.[104] President Clinton's trip to Israel during the height of the furor surrounding his impeachment may have helped distract attention from his domestic problems in both senses of that word.

Congress is a fragmented body usually unable to act quickly. It is also more likely to get negative coverage than either the White House or the Supreme Court. Unlike the executive branch, it lacks an ultimate spokesperson, a single individual who can speak for the whole institution.[105] Congress does not make it easy for the press to cover it. Whereas the White House engages in attentive care and feeding of the press corps, Congress does not arrange its schedule to accommodate the media; floor debates, for example, often compete with committee hearings and press conferences.[106] Singularly dramatic actions

rarely occur in Congress; the press therefore turns to the president to describe federal government activity on a day-to-day basis and treats Congress largely as a foil to the president. Most coverage of Congress is of its reaction to the initiatives of the president.[107]

The federal judiciary is least dependent on the press. The Supreme Court does not rely on public communication for political support. Rather, it relies indirectly on public opinion for continued deference to or compliance with its decisions.[108] The Court does not allow television cameras to cover oral arguments, rarely allows audiotaping, and has no reporters present when it votes. The Court has strong incentives to avoid the perception of manipulating the press, so it retains an image of aloofness from politics and public opinion. The justices' manipulation of press coverage is far more subtle and complex than that of the other two institutions.[109] For example, the complexity of the Supreme Court's decision in 2000's Florida vote recount case, with multiple dissents and concurrences and no press release or executive summary, made broadcast reporting on the decision difficult.

The news media's most influential role may be at the local level.[110] Most of us have multiple sources for finding out what is happening in Washington that act as a check on the biases and limitations of reporters who cover national government and policy. But when it comes to finding out about the city council, the school board, or the local water district, most of us are dependent on the work of a single reporter. Consequently, the media's influence is much greater when there are fewer news sources.

Not all who think the media are powerful agree that their power is harmful. After all, they argue, the media perform a vital educational function. Almost 70 percent of the public thinks the press is a watchdog that keeps government leaders from doing bad things.[111] At the very least, the media have the power to mold the agenda of the day; at most, in the words of the late Theodore White, they have the power to "determine what people will talk and think about—an authority that in other nations is reserved for tyrants, priests, parties, and mandarins."[112]

TABLE 10–2 PRESIDENTIAL PRESS CONFERENCES: JOINT AND SOLO SESSIONS, 1913–2004

President	*Total*	*Solo*	*Joint*	*Joint as Percentage of Total*	*Months in Office*	*Solo Sessions per Month*	*Solo Sessions per Year*
Wilson	157	157	0	0	96	1.6	19.6
Harding	No Transcripts Available				29		
Coolidge	521	521	0	0	67	7.8	93.4
Hoover	268	267	1	0.4	48	5.6	66.8
Roosevelt	1020	984	33	3.2	145.5	6.8	81.1
Truman	324	311	13	4.0	94.5	3.3	39.5
Eisenhower	193	192	1	0.5	96	2.0	24.0
Kennedy	65	65	0	0	34	1.9	23.0
Johnson	135	118	16	11.9	62	1.9	22.8
Nixon	39	39	0	0	66	0.6	7.1
Ford	40	39	1	2.5	30	1.3	15.6
Carter	59	59	0	0	48	1.2	14.8
Reagan	46	46	0	0	96	0.5	5.8
G. H. W. Bush	143	84	59	41.3	48	1.8	21.0
Clinton	193	62	131	67.9	96	0.7	7.8
G. W. Bush	85	16	69	81.2	46	0.4	4.2

Note: A joint press conference is one where the president answers questions along with someone else, most often a foreign leader. In a solo session, only the president answers questions. There are three missing transcripts for Roosevelt and one for Johnson, which makes it impossible to determine whether those sessions were solo or joint ones.

SOURCE: Chart from Martha Joynt Kumar, "Presidential Press Conferences: The Evolution of an Enduring Forum," *Presidential Studies Quarterly,* vol. 35, no. 1, March 2005.

SUMMARY

1. The news media include newspapers, magazines, radio, television, films, recordings, books, and electronic communications, in all their forms. These means of communication have been called the "fourth branch of government."
2. The news media are a pervasive feature of American politics and generally help define our culture. The rise of new communications technologies has made the media more influential throughout American society. The news media serve as a link between politicians and government officials and the public.
3. Our modern news media emerged from a more partisan and less professional past. Autonomy of the media from political parties is one of the important changes. Now journalists strive for objectivity and see themselves as important to the political process. They also engage in investigative journalism.
4. Broadcasting on radio and television has changed the news media, and most Americans use television and radio as primary news sources. The role of corporate ownership of media outlets, especially media conglomerates, raises questions about media competition and orientation.
5. The influence of the mass media over public opinion is significant but not overwhelming. People may not pay much attention to the media or may not believe everything they read or see or hear. They may be critical or suspicious of the media and hence resistant to it. People tend to filter the news through their political socialization, selectivity, needs, and ability to recall or comprehend the content of the news.
6. The media are criticized as biased both by conservatives (who charge that the media are too liberal) and by liberals (who claim that the media are captives of corporate interests and major advertisers). Little evidence exists of actual, deliberate bias in news reporting.
7. A major effect of mass media news is agenda setting—determining what problems will become salient issues for people to form opinions about and to discuss. The media are also influential in defining issues for the general public.
8. Presidential campaigns are dominated by media coverage both before and after the national convention. One effect of media influence is that most people seem more interested in the contest as a game or "horse race" than as an occasion for serious discussion of issues and candidates. Another effect has been the rise of image making and the media consultant.
9. The press serves as both observer and participant in politics, as a watchdog, agenda setter, and check on the abuse of power, but it rarely follows the policy process to its conclusion.

KEY TERMS

mass media
news media
issue advocacy
fairness doctrine
political socialization
selective exposure
selective perception
horse race

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