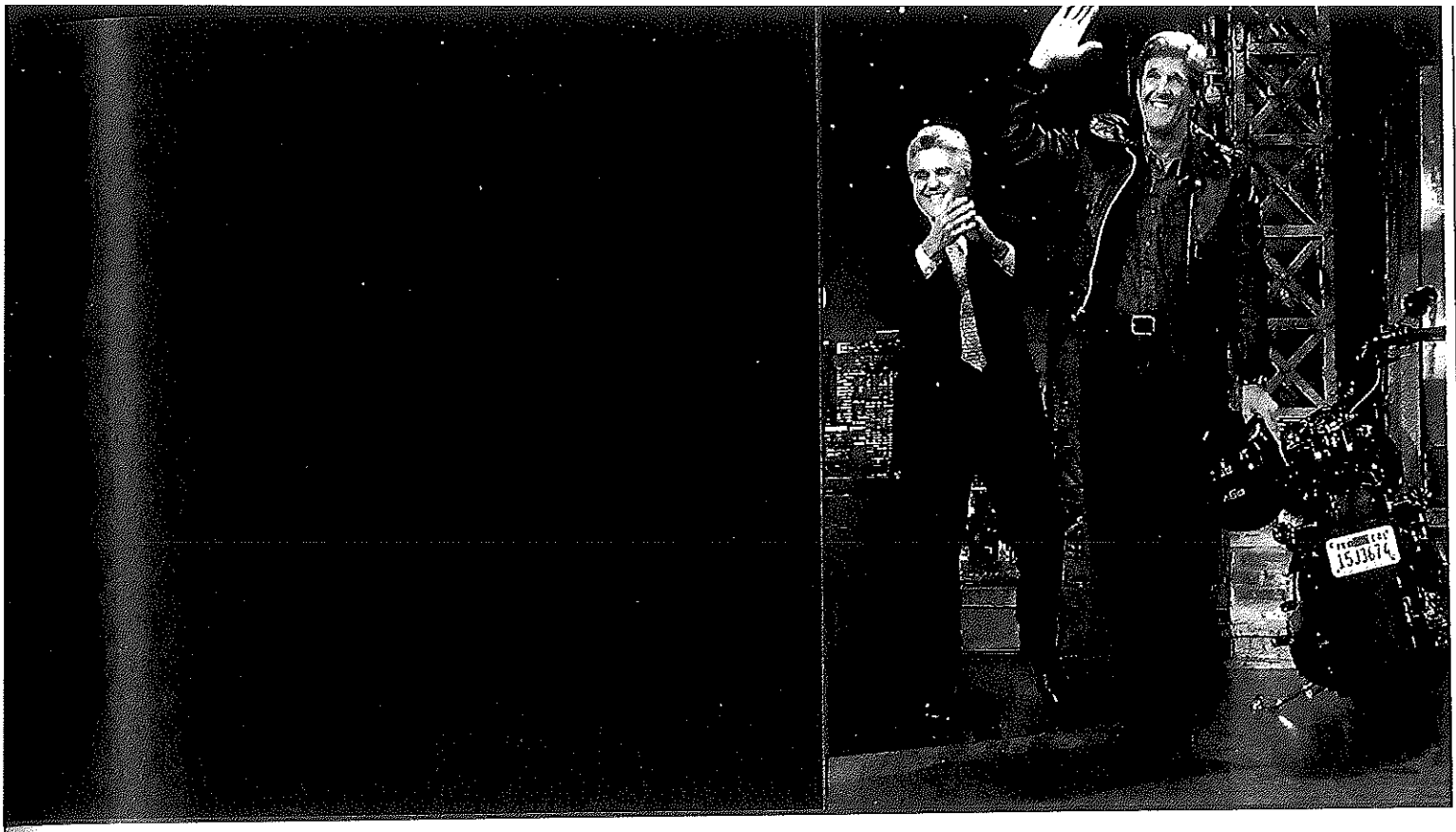
7

The Mass Media and the Political Agenda

Chapter Outline

■ In Washington's Smithsonian Museum, the television console used by President Lyndon Johnson in the mid-1960s can be seen on permanent display. Not wanting to miss anything on TV, Johnson asked for three screens to be installed in one console so he could monitor CBS, NBC, and ABC all at the same time. White House technicians rigged up a special remote control for the president, enabling him to switch the audio easily from one network to another. According to many observers, whenever he saw his picture appear, he immediately turned on the audio from that screen to hear what was being said about him.

As a piece of genuine Americana, LBJ's triple TV set symbolizes the tremendous importance television had assumed in U.S. politics by the mid-1960s. Interestingly, the same year that Lyndon Johnson finished his term as president, former Vice President Al Gore completed his senior thesis at Harvard on the impact of television on the conduct of the presidency. The essence of Gore's student thesis was that TV had an inherent bias toward individuals over



institutions that over time would bring more attention to the president at the expense of the other branches of government. With a president's power increasingly stemming from his ability to dominate the airwaves, Gore's thesis argued that the ability to communicate well through the visual medium of television was becoming crucial to governing. Ironically for a politician who regularly joked that the difference between himself and his Secret Service agents was that "he's the stiff one," the young Gore speculated that future presidents would have to have personalities that play well to the TV cameras.

The rise of television has had a profound impact on the two central questions we emphasize in this text—*How should we govern?* and *What should government do?* Television has brought an immediacy to how we govern, removing the filter of time from events. Whatever the problem or event, it is happening now—live on the TV screen. People thus have more reason than ever to expect immediate governmental responses. However, the Founding Fathers designed a very deliberative governing process, in which problems would be considered by multiple centers of political power and acted upon only after lengthy give and take. Given the difficulties of getting quick action through the American political system, it is no wonder the public has come to be more dissatisfied with our government in the television age.

In some cases, though, television has set the stage for leaders to take quick action affecting the scope of government. Lyndon Johnson was watching his triple screen TV set when NBC interrupted its airing of "Judgment at Nuremberg" to show film that had just become available of civil rights demonstrators being brutally attacked by police in Selma, Ala. Sensing the public outrage at this violence and injustice, Johnson soon proposed and pushed through the historic Voting Rights Act of 1965 (see Chapter 5). Today, any time a president takes strong action on some important policy problem, television sets the stage by focusing attention on the issue and putting it high on the policy agenda.

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.

The American political system has entered a new 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. The **mass media** are a key part of this technology. Television, radio, newspapers, magazines, the Internet, 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.
- The biases in the news.
- The impact of the media on policymakers and the public.

This chapter also reintroduces the concept of the policy agenda, in which the media play an important role.

The Mass Media Today

Whether promoting a candidate, drawing attention to a social issue, or generating a government program, effectively communicating a message is critical to political success. The key is gaining control over the political agenda, which 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 limit what they can report on to carefully scripted events. A **media event** is 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. For example, on the eve of the 2004 New Hampshire primary, John Kerry went door-to-door in a middle-class neighborhood with TV crews in tow. The few dozen people he met could scarcely have made a difference, but Kerry was not really there to win votes by personal contact. Rather, the point was to get television coverage of him reaching out to ordinary people. Getting the right image on TV news for just 30 seconds can easily have a 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."

media events

Events purposely staged for the media that nonetheless look spontaneous. In keeping with politics as theater, media events can be staged by individuals, groups, and government officials, especially presidents.

In addition, a large part of today's so-called 30-second presidency is the slickly produced TV commercial. Approximately 60 percent of presidential campaign spending is now devoted to TV ads. In recent presidential elections, about two-thirds of the prominently aired ads were negative commercials.[1] Many people are worried that the tirade of accusations, innuendoes, and countercharges in political advertising is poisoning the American political process and possibly even contributing to declining turnout.[2] Other democracies typically allocate their parties free air time for longer ads that go into more depth than is possible than with the American-style 30-second ad (see "America in Perspective: How Campaign Advertising Compares Across Five Nations").

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 years have devoted much attention to maintaining a well-honed public image, as shown in the following internal White House memo written by President Nixon.

> *When I think of the millions of dollars that go into one lousy 30-second television spot advertising a deodorant, it seems to me unbelievable that we don't do a better job in seeing that presidential appearances always have the very best professional advice whenever they are to be covered on TV. . . . The President should never be without the very best professional advice for making a television appearance.*[3]

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. According to Mark

America in Perspective

How Campaign Advertising Compares Across Five Nations

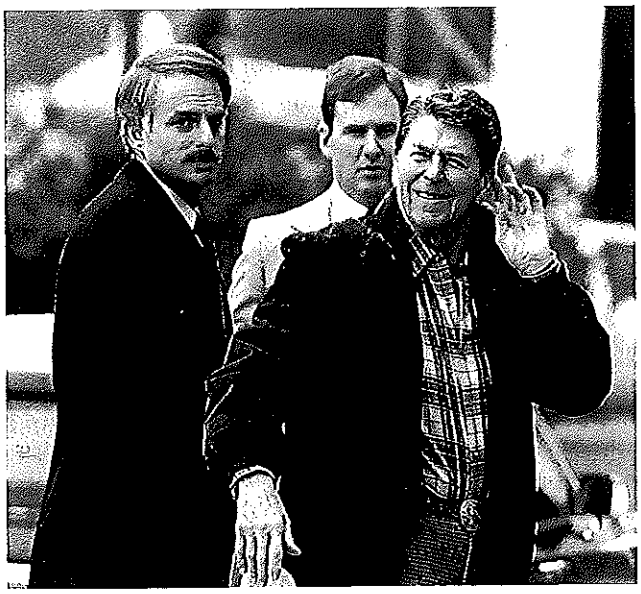
Campaign advertising in the United States differs greatly from that in other democracies. Most other countries have party-sponsored ads, provided by the state, with limits on both ad number and length. How do you think American elections might change if the government provided the parties with free air time like the British and French?

	UNITED STATES	BRITAIN	FRANCE	GERMANY	ISRAEL
Sponsorship	mostly candidate	party	party	party	party
Method of allocating ads	purchase	allocated by the state	allocated by the state	allocated by the state	allocated by the state
Limitations on number of ads	no	yes	yes	yes	yes
Duration of ads	unlimited, but typically only 30 seconds	2–3 minutes	up to 4 minutes	2-1/2 minutes	5 minutes

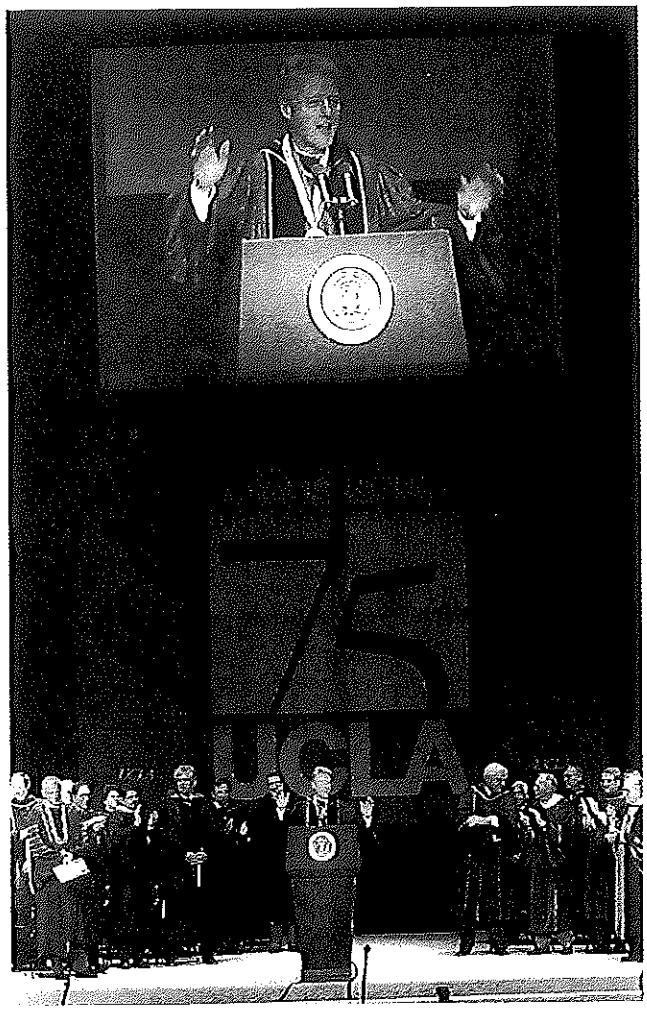
Source: Lynda Lee Kaid and Christina Holtz-Bacha, eds., *Political Advertising in Western Democracies: Parties and Candidates on Television* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1995).

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]

To Ronald Reagan, the presidency was often a performance, and his aides helped to choreograph his public appearances. Perhaps there will never again be a president so concerned with public relations as Reagan, but for a president to ignore the power of image and the media would be perilous. In today's high-tech age, presidents can



The Reagan administration carefully—and masterfully—controlled the president's image as presented by the media. To avoid having Reagan give unrehearsed answers, for example, his advisers would place the media at a distance and rev a helicopter engine so the president could not hear reporters' questions.



Television enables many more people to see candidates for elected office than would ever be possible in person. In fact, people have become so accustomed to seeing politicians' faces when they speak that giant TV screens are now often used to enable those attending political events to see the speakers' facial expressions.

hardly lead the country if they cannot communicate effectively with it. President Clinton once reflected on the unexpected dimensions of his job on *Larry King Live*: "The thing that has surprised me most is 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 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

There was virtually no daily press when the United States 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]

press conferences

Meetings of public officials with reporters.

Hoover's successor, Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933–1945), practically invented media politics. To Roosevelt, the media were a potential ally. Roosevelt promised reporters two press conferences—presidential meetings with reporters—a week, resulting in about 1,000 press conferences during his 12 years in the White House. FDR was

also the first president to use radio, broadcasting a series of reassuring "fireside chats" to the Depression-ridden nation. Roosevelt's crafty use of radio helped him win four presidential elections. Theodore White tells the story of the time in 1944 when FDR found out that his opponent, Thomas E. Dewey, had purchased 15 minutes of air time on NBC immediately following FDR's address. Roosevelt spoke for 14 minutes and then left 1 minute silent. Thinking that the network had experienced technical difficulties, many listeners changed their dials before Dewey came on the air.[7]

Another of Roosevelt's talents was knowing how to feed the right story to the right reporter. 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."[8] 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."[9]

The events of the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal, though, soured the press on government. Today's newspeople work in an environment of cynicism. To them, politicians rarely tell the whole story; the press sees ferreting out the truth as their job. No one has demonstrated this attitude better in recent years than Sam Donaldson. In his book, *Hold On, Mr. President!*, Donaldson wrote,

> *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.*[10]

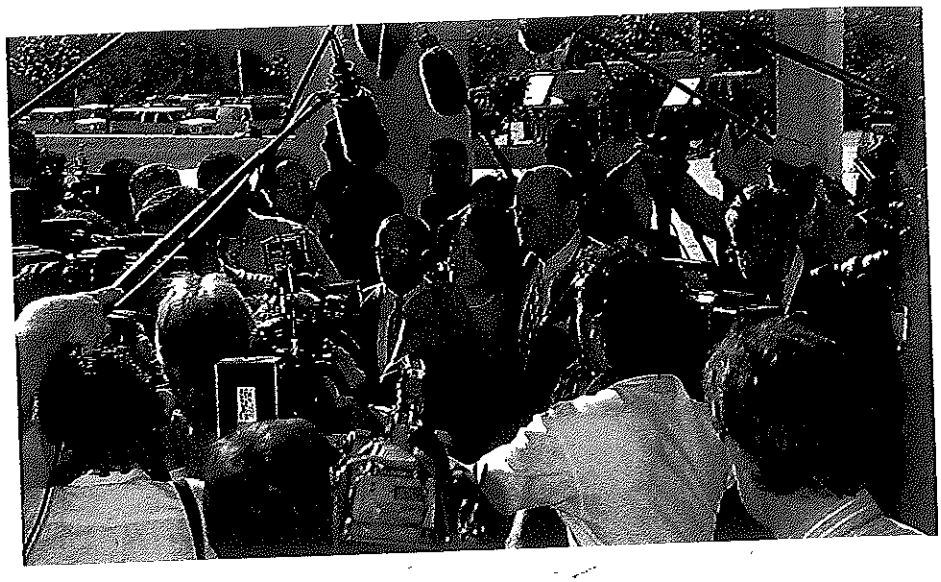
When the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal broke, the entire press corps reacted in this fashion. So strong was the desire to find out what the president had to hide in his personal life that 75 percent of the questions asked during the daily White House press briefing concerned this scandal in the first week after the story broke.[11] The Middle East was in crisis, the United States was building up its forces against Iraq, and the president was preparing a State of the Union address. But on TV and radio talk shows programming could best be described as "All Monica, All the Time."

Many political scientists are critical of **investigative journalism**—the use of detective-like reporting methods to unearth scandals—which often pits reporters against political leaders. There is evidence that TV's fondness for investigative journalism has contributed to greater public cynicism and negativity about politics.[12]

investigative journalism

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

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. His tally of *Time* and *Newsweek* stories about the campaigns reveals that favorable references about Kennedy and Nixon outnumbered unfavorable ones by a 3-to-1 margin. In contrast, in 1992 there were three negative references regarding Clinton and Bush for every two favorable references. Patterson's careful analysis uncovers several aspects of the trend toward more negative media coverage of the candidates over the last three decades. First, he finds that the emphasis of campaign reporting has changed dramatically from "what" to "why." Patterson's content analysis of front-page *New York Times* stories revealed that in 1960 over 90 percent of news stories employed a descriptive framework, whereas by 1992 less than 20 percent did so. Second, the type of interpretative story that has become more prominent is hard-biting analysis of political maneuvering and the horse race.



When someone becomes an instant political celebrity it takes a police escort to get them through the hordes of cameras and reporters. Here, Monica Lewinsky leaves a federal courthouse amid much commotion after providing evidence for the special prosecutor's investigation into charges of wrongdoing by President Clinton.

Such reporting tends toward unfavorable impressions of the candidates because the unstated assumption behind much of today's coverage of the issues has shifted from policy statements to campaign controversies. Coverage of such issues as whether George W. Bush fulfilled his military obligations or John F. Kerry lied about his experiences in Vietnam are not likely to draw favorable references. 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 was over:

> *"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, dismissive of issue positions, focused on the internals of the campaign and not on the big messages and really serves to trivialize the whole contest."*[13]

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 that they overemphasize the controversial aspects of the campaign at the expense of an examination of the major issues.

print media

Newspapers and magazines, as compared with **broadcast media**.

broadcast media

Television and radio, as compared with **print media**.

Scholars distinguish between two kinds of media: the **print media**, which include newspapers and magazines, and the **broadcast media**, which include radio, television, and the Internet. Each has reshaped political communication at different points 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.

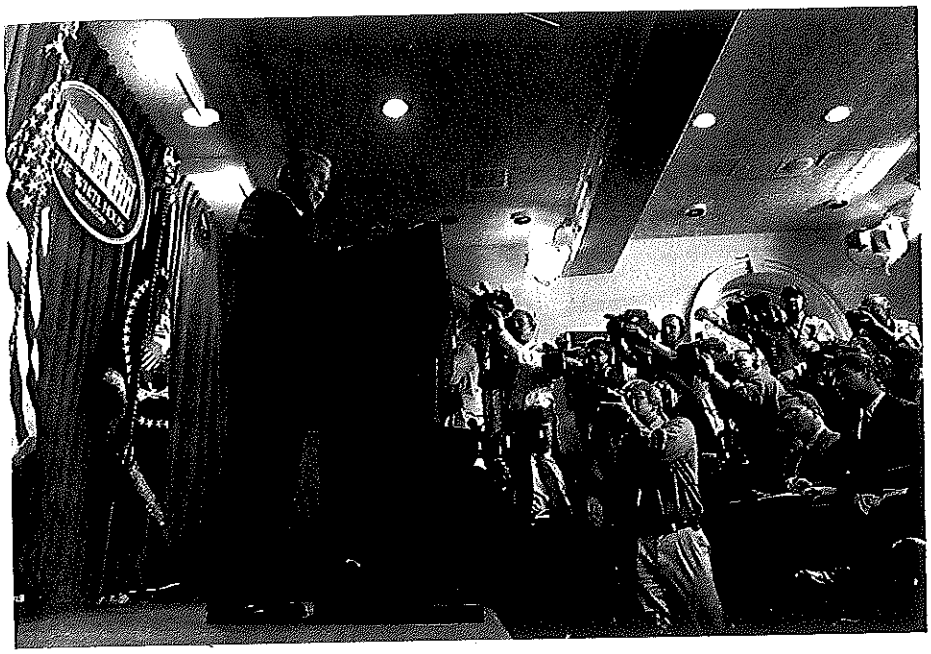
The Print Media

Timeline

Three Centuries of American Mass 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 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. This has given the media a unique ability to display the government's dirty linen, a propensity that continues to distinguish the American press today.

At the turn of the century, newspaper magnates Joseph and William Randolph Hearst ushered in the era of "yellow journalism." This sensational style of reporting focused on violence, corruption, wars, and gossip, often with a less than scrupulous regard for the truth. On a visit to the United States at that time, young Winston Churchill said that "the essence of American journalism is vulgarity divested of



The White House press room is often the scene of much activity, with daily briefings on the president's activities each day the president is in residence. Contrary to the image that is often presented on television, reporters work in a cramped environment at the White House.

truth."[14] In the midst of the Spanish-American conflict over Cuba, Hearst once boasted of his power over public opinion by telling a news artist "You furnish the pictures and I'll furnish the war."

Among the press there is a pecking order. Almost from the beginning, the *New York Times* was a cut above most newspapers in its influence and impact; it is the nation's "newspaper of record" and can be found on line at *www.nytimes.com*. Its clearest rival in government circles is the *Washington Post* (*www.washingtonpost.com*), offering perhaps the best coverage inside Washington and a sprightlier alternative to the *Times*. Papers such as the *Chicago Tribune* (*www.chicagotribune.com*) and the *Los Angeles Times* (*www.latimes.com*), as well as those in Atlanta, Boston, and other big cities, are also major national institutions. For most newspapers in medium-sized and small towns, though, the main source of national and world news is the Associated Press wire service, whose stories are reprinted in small newspapers across the country. With 2,700 reporters, photographers, and editors scattered around every major location in the United States, the Associated Press has more news-gathering ability than any other news organization.

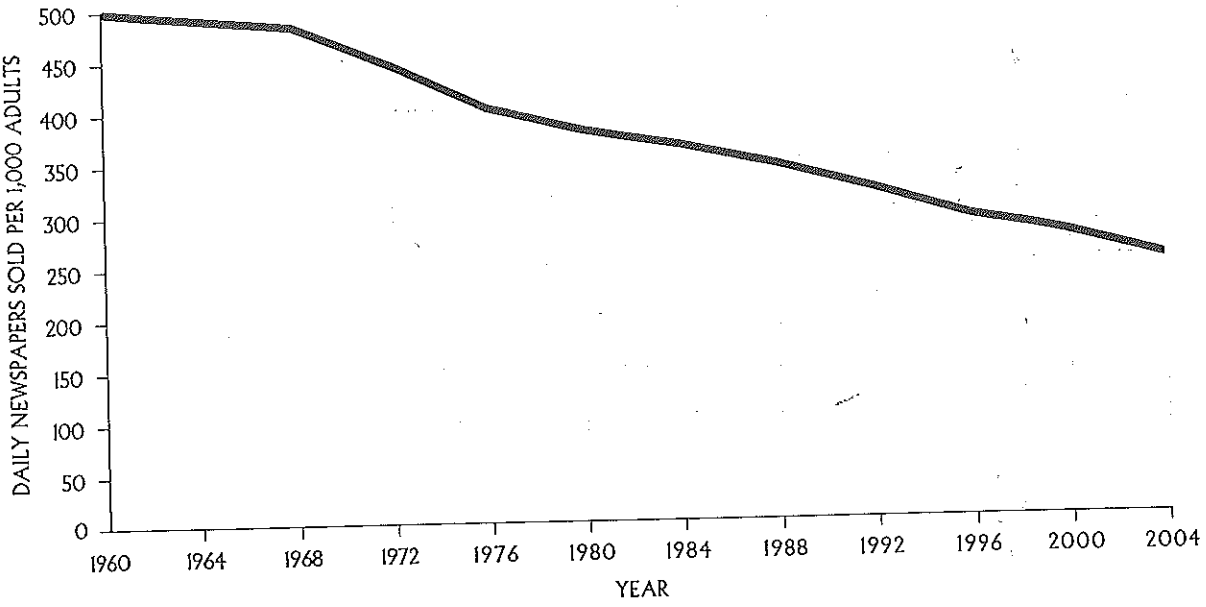
Simulation
You Are a News Editor

Ever since the rise of TV news, however, newspaper circulation rates have been declining, as you can see in Figure 7.1. Most political scientists who have studied the role of media in politics believe this is an unfortunate trend, as studies invariably find that regular newspaper readers are better informed and more likely to vote.[15] This should hardly be surprising given the greater degree of information available in a newspaper compared to TV. A major metropolitan newspaper averages roughly 100,000 words daily, whereas a typical broadcast of the nightly news on TV will amount to only about 3,600 words.[16] It remains to be seen whether the availability of most newspapers on the web will lead more people to look at newspapers in the future, or rather will prove to be a desperate gasp for a fading business.

Magazines, the other component of the print media, are also struggling in the Internet age, especially when it comes to the few that are heavily concerned with political events. The so-called newsweeklies—mainly *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report*—rank well behind such popular favorites as the *Reader's Digest*, *TV Guide*, and *National Geographic*. Although *Time*'s circulation is a bit better than that of the *National Enquirer*, *Playboy* and *People* edge out *Newsweek* in sales competition. Serious magazines of political news and opinion tend to be read by the educated elite; magazines such as the *New Republic*, the *National Review*, and the *Atlantic Monthly*

Figure 7.1 The Decline of Newspaper Circulation

Following is the average number of newspapers sold daily per 1,000 Americans over the age of 18. Whereas one newspaper was sold for every two adults in 1960, by 2004 only one paper was sold for every four adults.



Source: Editor and Publisher; U.S. Census Bureau.

are outsold by American favorites such as *Hot Rod, Weightwatchers Magazine,* and *Organic Gardening.*

The Broadcast Media

Gradually, the broadcast media 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. The 1950s and early 1960s were the adolescent years for American television. During those years, the political career of Richard Nixon was made and unmade by television. In 1952, while running as Dwight Eisenhower's vice-presidential candidate, Nixon made a famous speech denying that he took gifts and payments under the table. He did admit accepting one gift—his dog, Checkers. Noting that his daughters loved the dog, Nixon said that regardless of his political future, they would keep it. His homey appeal brought a flood of sympathetic telegrams to the Republican National Committee, and party leaders had little choice but to leave him on the ticket.

In 1960, Nixon was again on television's center stage, this time in the first televised presidential debate against Senator John F. Kennedy. Nixon blamed his poor appearance in the first of the four debates for his narrow defeat in the election. 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 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.[17]

Just as radio had taken the nation to the war in Europe and the Pacific during the 1940s, television took the nation to the war in Vietnam during the 1960s. TV exposed governmental naïveté (some said it was outright lying) about the progress of the war. Every night, in living color, Americans watched the horrors of war 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.[18]

With the growth of cable TV, particularly the Cable News Network (CNN), television has recently entered a new era of bringing the news to people—and to political leaders—as it happens. Michael Bohn writes that CNN has become a valuable source of breaking information in the White House Situation Room.[19] President George W. Bush and his aides regularly watched CNN during the military campaign in Afghanistan; Osama Bin Laden's videotaped messages were regularly broadcast in part on CNN, enabling him to get his message out to a worldwide audience. A frequent response from U.S. officials to reporters' questions during the war against terrorism was something along the lines of "I don't know any more than what you saw on CNN."

Since 1963, surveys have consistently shown that more people rely on TV for the news than any other medium. Furthermore, by a regular 2-to-1 margin, people think television reports are more believable than newspaper stories.[20] (Consider the old sayings "Don't believe everything you read" and "I'll believe it when I see it.") Whereas people are predisposed to be skeptical about what they read in a newspaper, with television seeing is believing.

Why It Matters

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 then, 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 provide for the future and the political agenda has come to focus more on the here and now.

Government Regulation of the Broadcast Media

When broadcast media first appeared 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, but in practice it is subject to many political pressures. Congress uses its control over the purse strings of the agency to influence the commission, and presidential appointments to it are naturally made with political considerations in mind.

The FCC has regulated the airwaves in three important ways. First, to prevent near-monopolies of control over a broadcast market, it has instituted rules to limit the number of stations owned or controlled by one company. This once involved a variety of limitations but since 1996 has been simplified to simply state 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 only on rare occasions withdrawn licenses for failing to do so, such 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 was in place, which 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

Making a Difference

Matt Drudge

Matt Drudge was 30 years old when he broke his first story about Monica Lewinsky's relationship with President Clinton, which would become the biggest political scandal of the 1990s. He had neither verified the story nor done any extensive research on it. All he had to go on was the rumor that *Newsweek* had been working on this story. But for Drudge, a rumor was good enough to report on. When Drudge posted the Lewinsky story on his website (*www.drudgereport.com*), he knew his life would be changed forever, and for quite some time so would the nation's. Opinions on Matt Drudge and his reporting techniques vary widely. Because of his penchant for reporting rumors and gossip, the *New York Times* has called him "the nation's chief mischief maker." Others have dubbed him the first Internet superstar and praised how he has paved the way for communication power to be transferred from media giants to anyone with a modem. However one views him, it is clear that Matt Drudge has made a difference. Currently, his website draws over 2 billion hits a year.

channels via cable, this was seen as an unnecessary rule by the late 1980s, when it was abolished.

Narrowcasting: Cable TV and the Internet

The future of political communication seems destined to bring more and more choices regarding what we can see about our government. About two-thirds of the American public currently subscribes to cable television, thereby giving them access to dozens of channels. Sometime in the not-too-distant future it is expected that most cable systems will offer 500 channels. How will this explosion of TV channels impact political communication? Our best guess, based on developments with cable TV to date, is that information about politics will be presented in a way that appeals to a narrow and specific audience rather than to the public at large.

The first major networks—ABC, NBC, and CBS—adopted the term "broadcasting" in the names of their companies because their signal was being sent out to a broad audience. As long as these networks dominated the industry, each would have to deal with general topics that the public as a whole was concerned with, such as politics and government. But with the development of cable TV, market segmentation has taken hold. Sports buffs can watch ESPN all day, music buffs can tune to MTV or VH1, history buffs can glue their dial to the History Channel, and so forth. If you are interested in politics, you can channel surf 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," rather than traditional "broadcasting." This is even more true for websites, which require minimal start-up costs and hence can be successful with a very small and specific audience. An analysis of media usage patterns by age shows that young adults are the most likely to be using the Internet to learn about politics. (See "Young People and Politics: How the Under-30 Crowd Learns from Different Media Sources Compared to Older Americans").

narrowcasting

Media programming on cable TV or the Internet that is focused on one topic and aimed at a particular audience. Examples include MTV, ESPN, and C-SPAN.

Participation

Democracy and the Internet

As the number of channels and websites proliferates, it is clear that political junkies will find more political information readily available than ever before. Rumors once carefully verified by careful journalists are now immediately disseminated around the world electronically (see "Making a Difference: Matt Drudge"). But with so many readily available sources of information for so many specific interests, it will also be extremely easy for those who are not very interested in politics to completely avoid news and public affairs. And as Doris Graber writes, "While available food for political thought has grown, despite much overlap and redundancy, the appetite for it and the capacity to consume it remain limited."[21] Some scholars are worried that the result could well be a growing inequality of political information, with the politically interested becoming more knowledgeable while the rest of the public slips further into political apathy.

Private Control of the Media

One of the main reasons America has such a rich diversity of media sources 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 low ratings. In contrast, in many other countries major TV net-

Young People and Politics

How the Under-30 Crowd Learns from Different Media Sources Compared to Older Americans

In January of 2004, the Pew Research Center asked a representative sample whether they regularly learned about the presidential campaign from a variety of media sources. This table shows the results, broken down by age. Notice that young people are substantially more likely to learn from the Internet and comedy TV shows. In contrast, older people are more likely to learn from the traditional sources of newspapers and network TV news (i.e., NBC, CBS, and ABC). Because so many young people are bypassing these sources, newspapers and network news are both facing the likely prospect of declining audiences for some time to come.

Cable TV news—CNN, MSNBC, and the Fox News Channel—have seen their audiences expand in recent years, as Americans of all ages have come to rely on them fairly heavily. However, given how little time most people stay tuned to these channels one has to be skeptical that people are getting much more than basic headlines from these sources. In theory, the Internet offers all the details about public policy and government that anyone could want. Whether very many of those who learn about politics via the Internet take advantage of the opportunities offered there remains to be seen. Comedy shows, on the other hand, offer very limited chances for learning about politics. Young people seem to enjoy them, though, and are at least having a good time learning from them.

% SAYING THEY REGULARLY LEARN SOMETHING ABOUT THE PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN FROM:	AGE 18–29	AGE 30–49	AGE 50–64	AGE 65+
Cable news networks	37	37	43	37
Nightly network news	23	32	44	49
Daily newspaper	23	27	37	45
Comedy TV shows	21	6	5	2
Internet	20	16	11	3
Late-night TV talk shows like Letterman and Leno	13	7	7	9

Source: January 2004 survey by The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. http://people-press.org/reports/isplay.php3?ReportID=200.

Questions for Discussion

- How much do you think can really be learned about politics from the comedy shows that one out of five young people say they learn from?
- Why do you think young people are so much less likely to learn from the traditional major news sources—TV network news and newspapers?

works are owned by the government. In Canada the most prominent stations are part of the state-run Canadian Broadcasting Company, and most anywhere in Europe the major networks are government-owned. In these established democracies, government ownership is not supposed to inhibit journalists from criticizing the government because the journalists are assured autonomy. In underdeveloped countries like China, where democracy has yet to take root, it is a different story: Both television and newspapers are typically government enterprises and have to carefully avoid any criticism of their country's government. Private ownership of the media as well as the First Amendment right to free speech has long meant that American journalists have an unfettered capacity to criticize government leaders and policies.

Although the American media is free and 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 audience is the primary—indeed, sometimes the only—objective. The major media in America are big business today and potentially the source of great profits. In recent years, the major television networks have been bought out by giant corporations. 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. Major metropolitan newspapers are mostly owned by **chains**, such as Gannett, Knight-Ridder, and Newhouse. Today's massive media conglomerates control newspapers with over 80 percent of the nation's daily circulation.[22] Thus, four out of five newspaper subscribers now read a newspaper owned not by a fearless local editor but by a corporation headquartered elsewhere. Often these chains control television and radio stations as well.

chains

Newspapers published by massive media conglomerates that account for over four-fifths of the nation's daily newspaper circulation. Often these chains control broadcast media as well.

With corporate business managers increasingly calling the shots, American journalism has definitely been affected. For example, the major television networks once had bureaus all over the world and felt a responsibility to report on world affairs. Such foreign bureaus became an easy target for cost-cutting business executives, as they were expensive to operate and survey data showed that the public was not much interested in news from overseas. A study of network news broadcasts found that ABC, NBC, and CBS broadcast just 1,382 minutes of foreign news in 2000 compared to 4,032 minutes in 1989.[23] Consequently, by September 11, 2001, the American public was largely unfamiliar with overseas news and the TV networks had to scramble to establish an ability to cover it. As we shall see in the following section, striving for profits greatly shapes how the news is reported in America.

Reporting the News

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 oft-repeated speech on foreign policy or a well-worn statement on fighting drug abuse is less newsworthy than an odd episode. The public rarely hears about the routine ceremonies at state dinners, but when President George Bush threw up all over the Japanese prime minister in 1992, the world's media jumped on the story. Similarly, when Howard Dean screamed 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 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*,[24] which summarizes his observations from a year of observing NBC's news department from inside the organization. Epstein found that in their 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 argue that entertainment has increasingly pushed out information in the TV news business. In 2002, they wrote 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.*[25]

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

How You Can Make a Difference

The Internet and Political Action

Until very recently, the average citizen had little voice within the mass media beyond opinion pages in newspapers. The advent of the Internet, however, has changed this—as the story of Matt Drudge breaking the Monica Lewinsky story clearly demonstrates. With the modest exception of small low-frequency radio stations and low-cost alternative newspapers that reach relatively few people, before the Internet no media allowed ordinary people to do so immediately and powerfully affect public opinion and to challenge politicians and governments.

In fact, the meaning of grass-roots activism has changed as the world has become increasingly web savvy. In the comfort of a dorm room, today's college students can help topple foreign governments and pressure domestic government agencies into action. The governments in China, Malaysia, and Mexico have all been targets of Internet activists pressing for improved human rights. For example, the small and largely ineffectual Zapatista National Liberation Army led by the ski-masked Subcommante Marcos has used the Internet to raise funds and convince thousands in Europe, North America, and Latin America to picket Mexican consulates in support of autonomy for the indigenous people of Chiapas. Jagdish Parikh of Human Rights Watch notes that "... what is making the difference is that ordinary people are now coming to this medium." This is especially true in the more technically advanced United States where the Internet and computers have become a necessity rather than a luxury. In the late 1990s, Internet postings and e-mails from civil liberties groups convinced the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation to maintain strict privacy rules. According to *Business Week*, the FDIC got 205,000 e-mails opposing any loosening of their privacy policy compared to less than 100 in favor of a change.

Some observers note that many of the accepted rules of politics expressed in this textbook may become obsolete as the power of the Internet grows and changes the political landscape. While other pundits caution that the impact of the Internet can be exaggerated especially outside the United States, Jagdish Parikh wisely considers, "How many people in China have Internet access? Not many. But then why is the government there rushing to make laws restricting access? It's because the Internet makes people realize that they should have the legal, codified right to information."

What you can do:

- *Clearly* define the issue that concerns you.
- Employ the necessary tools to make your online campaign effective.
- Visit *www.onenw.org/toolkit* for resources on making your campaign effective.

Source: Pete Engardio, Richard Dunham, Heidi Dawley, Irene Kunji, and Elisabeth Malkin, "Activists Without Borders," *Business Week* (October 4, 1999): 144–149.

newsworthy, where they get their information, and how they present it. Because some types of news stories attract more viewers or readers than others, certain biases are inherent 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, during the 1991 Gulf War, more than 50 percent of the lead stories on TV newscasts came from the White House, Pentagon, and State Department beats.[26] Numerous studies of both the electronic and the print media show that journalists rely almost exclusively on such established sources to get their information.[27]

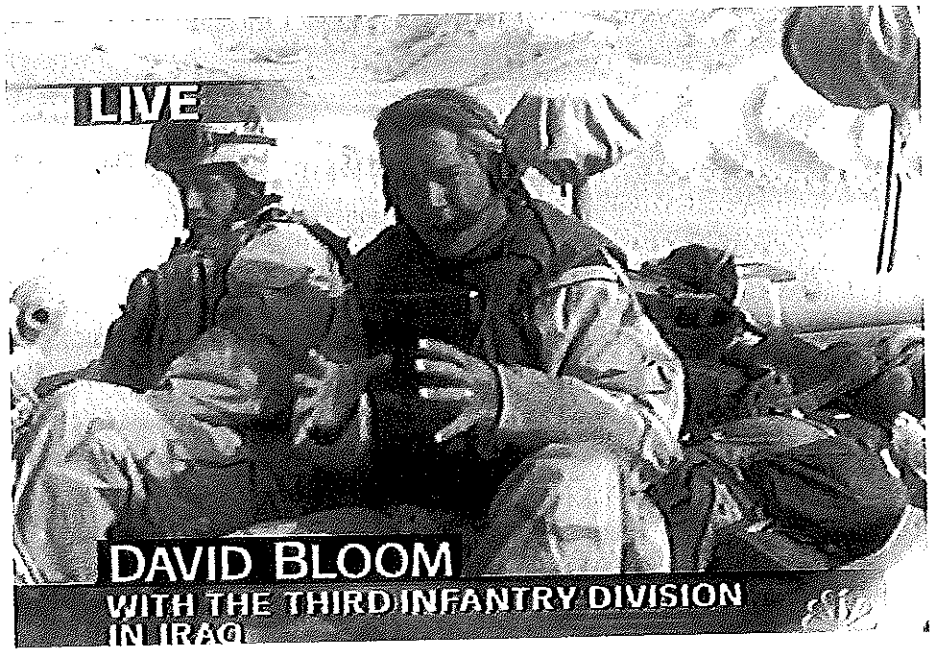
Those who make the news depend on the media to spread certain information and ideas to the general public. Sometimes they feed stories to reporters in the form of trial balloons: information leaked to see what the political reaction will be. For example, a few days prior to President Clinton's admission that he had 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

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.

trial balloons

An intentional news leak for the purpose of assessing the political reaction.



During the 2003 Iraqi War, a number of journalists were embedded with fighting units, meaning that they traveled along with them day after day and literally became part of the unit. Being right in with the action enabled an immediacy of reporting that was never possible before. One much-praised example of embedded reporting was that of NBC's David Bloom, who sent back stunningly clear pictures of what it was like to move through the desert with an infantry division. Sadly, Bloom was one of a number of journalists who died during the conflict with Iraq. He suffered a pulmonary embolism, a condition that may have been brought on by long hours confined to a very small space inside an armored tank.

appeared just before Clinton had to decide how to testify before Kenneth Starr's grand jury. When the public reacted that it was about time he admitted this relationship, it was probably easier for him to do so—at least politically.

Reporters and their official sources have a symbiotic relationship. Newsmakers rely on journalists to get their message out at the same time that reporters rely on public officials to keep them in the know. When reporters feel that their access to information is being impeded, complaints of censorship become widespread. During the 1991 Gulf War, 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.[28] In response to complaints about the lack of access for reporters in the first Gulf War, the Pentagon embedded about 500 reporters with coalition fighting forces during the 2003 Iraq War, thus enabling them to report on combat activity as it happened. The public response to this new form of war reporting was largely positive, as you can see in the polling data displayed in Table 7.1.

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 in the Watergate case 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. Such reporting is highly valued among the media elite.

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 for their 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 2000 a Houston TV station reported on Ford Explorers equipped with Firestone tires that were involved in a series of fatal traffic accidents. Its reports led to the recall of millions of tires and probably saved many lives.

Table 7.1 Embedded Reporting of the Iraq War: Opposing Opinions

About two weeks after the start of hostilities against Iraq the *Los Angeles Times* poll asked a representative sample of the U.S. population a carefully balanced question about the embedded reporting of the war. The question was:

Reporters have been assigned to U.S. military units in the region of Iraq and given unprecedented access to military action and personnel. Which of the following statements comes closer to your view: (1) "Greater media coverage of the military action and U.S. personnel in Iraq is good for the country because it gives the American people an uncensored view of events as they unfold" or (2) "Greater media coverage of the military action and U.S. personnel in Iraq is bad for the country because it provides too much information about military actions as they unfold?"

The results are presented here for the sample as a whole, as well as by gender.

	ALL	MEN	WOMEN
Embedded reporting good for the country	55%	58%	52%
Embedded reporting bad for the country	37%	34%	41%
Don't know	8%	8%	7%

Source: Los Angeles Times national poll conducted April 2–3, 2003.

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 the advertisements in a newspaper. If you had to pick a single word to describe news coverage by the print and broadcast 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."[29] Editors do not want to bore or confuse their audience. TV news, in particular, is little more than a headline service. According to CBS anchor Dan Rather, "You simply cannot be a well-informed citizen by just watching the news on television."[30]

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 (see Chapter 9) found that only skimpy attention was given to the issues during a presidential campaign. Clearly, if coverage of political events 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 how the consumer price index is calculated, and deregulating the communications industry are highly complex and difficult to treat in a short news clip. A careful study of media coverage of President Clinton's comprehensive health care proposal early in his first term found that the media focused much more on strategy and who was winning the political game than on the specific policy issues involved.[31]

Strangely enough, as technology has enabled the media to pass along information with greater speed, news coverage has become less thorough.[32] Modern high-tech communications equipment has helped reporters do their job faster but not necessarily better, as you can read about in "Issues of the Times: Has Technology Really Improved the Quality of Political Reporting?" on pages 228–229. 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 hear **sound bites** of 15 seconds or less on TV. As you can see in Figure 7.2, the average length of time that a presidential candidate has been given to talk uninterrupted on the TV news has declined precipitously since the late 1960s. Responding to criticism of sound-bite journalism, in 1992 CBS News briefly vowed that it would let a candidate speak for at least 30 seconds at a time. However, CBS found this to be unworkable and soon dropped the

sound bites

Short video clips of approximately 15 seconds; typically all that is shown from a politician's speech or activities on the nightly television news.

threshold to 20 seconds, noting that even this was flexible.[33] In 2000, the average sound bite of a candidate shown talking on the nightly news once again averaged less than 10 seconds.

Even successful politicians sometimes feel frustrated by sound-bite journalism. A year after his election to the presidency, 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.*[34]

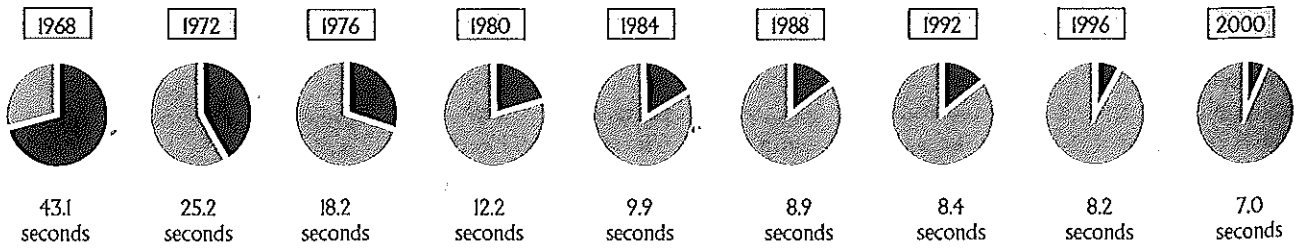
Rather than presenting their audience with the whole chicken, the media typically give just a McNugget. Why should politicians work to build a carefully crafted case for their point of view when a catchy line will do just as well? As former CBS anchor Walter Cronkite writes, "Naturally, nothing of any 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."[35] Cronkite and others have proposed that in order to force candidates to go beyond sound bites they should be given blocks of free air time for a series of nights to discuss their opposing views (see "You Are the Policymaker: Should the Networks Have To Provide Free Air Time to Presidential Candidates?" on page 230).

Over the last decade, politicians have found it increasingly difficult to get their message covered on the major networks, as ratings pressures have led to a decrease in political coverage, leaving the field to the much-less watched channels like CNN and MSNBC. The three major networks *together* devoted an average of 12.6 minutes per night to the exceedingly close 2000 presidential election campaign; just half the 24.6 minutes they devoted to the 1992 campaign.[36] Indeed, in the presidential election of 2000 voters had to bypass the network television newscasts and watch the TV talk shows to hear candidates deliver their messages. George Bush was on-screen for a total of 13 minutes during his appearance on "Late Night With David Letterman" on October 19, which exceeded his entire speaking time on all three network news shows during that month. Similarly, Al Gore received more speaking time on his September 14 Letterman appearance than he did during the entire month of September on the network evening newscasts.[37]

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 of 2000, for example, 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.[38]

Figure 7.2 The Incredible Shrinking Sound Bite

Following is the average length of time a presidential candidate was shown speaking uninterrupted on the evening network news from 1968 to 2000.



Source: Daniel Hallin, "Sound Bite News: Television Coverage of Elections," *Journal of Communications*, Spring 1992; 1992–2000 data from studies by the Center for Media and Public Affairs.

Until September 11, the Bush White House was finding it harder to get media attention than any administration in a long time. A study of the first 60 days of coverage of the presidencies of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush on ABC, NBC, CBS, PBS, the section fronts and opinion pages of the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and *Newsweek* found that there were 41 percent fewer stories on Bush than on Clinton. *Newsweek* stories on the president had decreased by 59 percent over the eight years, while network coverage was down 43 percent and the *Post* and the *Times* had fallen off by 38 percent.[39] Although the prominence of the president increased after the September 11 terrorist attacks, there is no reason to think the trend toward less coverage of the White House has been permanently reversed.

Bias in the News

Many people believe that the news is biased in favor of one point of view. During the 1996 presidential campaign, Bob Dole often charged that the press was against him. "Annoy the Media—Elect Dole" became one of his favorite lines. The charge that the media have a liberal bias has become a familiar one in American politics, and there is some limited evidence to support it. A lengthy study by the *Los Angeles Times* in the mid-1980s found that reporters were twice as likely to call themselves liberal as the general public.[40] A 2002 survey of 1,149 journalists found that 37 percent identified themselves as Democrats, compared to just 19 percent who said they were Republicans.[41]

However, the vast majority of social science studies have found that reporting is not systematically biased toward a particular ideology or party.[42] Most stories are presented in a "point/counterpoint" format in which two opposing points of view (such as liberal versus conservative) are presented, and the audience is left to draw its own conclusions. Two factors explain why the news is typically characterized by such political neutrality. Most reporters strongly believe in journalistic objectivity, and those who practice it best are usually rewarded by their editors. In addition, media outlets have a direct financial stake in attracting viewers and subscribers and do not want to lose their audience by appearing biased—especially when multiple versions of the same story are readily available. It seems paradoxical to say that competition produces uniformity, but this often happens in the news business.

Why It Matters

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.

Issues of the Times

The New York Times nytimes.com

The Issue: Has Technology Really Improved the Quality of Political Reporting?

Good journalists have always been concerned about getting news to the public quickly. But recent developments in communications technology have made it perhaps too easy for journalists to send out information to their home offices. The constant pressure to feed stories back to the newsroom has left journalists with little time for contemplation or checking their stories for accuracy. On the positive side, more information can be conveyed than ever before. Yet, there is debate about whether the quality of political reporting has been improved as a result.

Read All About It

Making of the Digital Press Corps, 2004

By Katharine Q. Seelye
January 29, 2004

Howard Dean was taking questions from a crowd of New Hampshire voters the other day when a young man asked him, "Governor Dean, can I pray for you?"

Dr. Dean, the Democratic presidential candidate and former governor of Vermont, responded that he could use all the prayers he could get. Whereupon the young man immediately began a dialogue with the Almighty.

"Oh, I didn't know you meant right now!" Dr. Dean interjected, before telling him to go ahead.

As bizarre campaign moments go, this one was brief and not really all that bizarre. But Mike Roselli, a producer for CNN, thought it was worth alerting his bosses in case they needed fresh tape of Dr. Dean.

So Mr. Roselli quickly punched an e-mail message into his BlackBerry. He titled it "Pray For Me," concisely recounted the incident and concluded: "The prayer includes a plea to God asking him to cure Dean's cold."...

... Mr. Roselli, a campaign veteran, thought the prayer was more interesting than some of the material being beamed from CNN producers who were following other candidates ("Candidate X drinks a chocolate milkshake!") but conceded that he had sent it partly because he could. And he worried that someone else might.

"Four years ago, I wouldn't have called that in until the event was over," he said. "But there's more competition now, 24 hours a day."

Please see Press Page 229

Press

Continued from Page 228

A deadline every minute, once the preserve of the wire services, is now the motto for most of the press corps, from print reporters with newspaper Web sites to still photographers, cable producers and bloggers. The news cycle has condensed into one endless loop, and with it has come a endless stream of technology to accommodate it, or fuel it, since it is hard to say which came first.

Campaign reporters, like war correspondents, are not necessarily gadget geeks. But the rapacious 24-hour news cycle has forced them onto the cutting edge to do their jobs better—or at least faster. The equipment is even altering the shape of the correspondent's day, which now includes scrolling in the morning through "The Note," an online political briefing from ABC News, and checking one another's Web sites at night, trying all the while to get a jump on everyone else.

The great leaps forward for print reporters in this campaign cycle are wireless laptops and digital tape recorders with software that allows them to download a candidate's speech immediately onto the laptops as an audio file. For television reporters, it is the ubiquitous hand-held minicam, which blurs the line between home video and politically revealing moments, like those captured by Alexandra Pelosi in "Journeys With George," her movie of George W. Bush shot with a hand-held camera during the 2000 campaign. . . .

The digital tape recorder that produces audio files has become essential for reporters trying to keep track of multiple speeches and bang out an article before flying off to another location.

A deadline every minute, once the preserve of the wire services, is now the motto for most of the press corps.

With the audio software, up comes an image of a tape recorder on the computer screen. "It's so easy to play, rewind and play a quote over and over until you've got it," said Glen Johnson of *The Boston Globe,* who has been following Dr. Dean and Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts.

Mr. Johnson said his Sony digital recorder solved two problems. "It's got a much longer capacity than the standard reel-to-reel recorder, with up to five hours," he said. "And I can archive and organize all the speeches and permanently keep everything that's said on the trail without having to lug around a bunch of tapes and be out on the road without the tape I want."

He can also e-mail the audio files back to *The Globe,* which can put the sound bite on its Web site. . . .

Not every reporter, to be sure, is enamored of what technology has wrought. Jules Witcover, 76, a columnist for *The Baltimore Sun,* who covered his first campaign in 1960 by handing his copy to a Western Union boy, said he prefers to stick with the basics. . . .

[H]e does not like what the proliferation of gadgets has done to journalism, or to journalists. "Technology has impinged on reporting," he said. He said that candidates used to schmooze with reporters on the plane because they could pick whom they wanted to talk with and others would respect their privacy. Now, he said, if a candidate comes back, everybody gathers around. And with boom microphones and discreet recording gear and phones that can secretly take pictures and transmit them instantly, the candidate cannot relax.

"Rather than take a chance, they don't do it," Mr. Witcover said. "It has eroded the relationship that you could build up with a candidate."

Beyond that, he said, even a long bus ride at night is no fun anymore because most people are on their cellphones—and always on deadline.

Think About It

- What are the possible disadvantages of making it so easy for journalists to report on every little detail almost instantly? Do you think these disadvantages outweigh the advantages of greater access to information?
- Do you think editors should encourage some reporters to focus on sending back every detail whereas others are assigned to take their time and carefully analyze what they have seen and heard?

You Are the Policymaker

Should the Networks Have to Provide Free Air Time to Presidential Candidates?

In 1996, a group of prominent political and media figures proposed the idea of a series of free prime-time television appearances for presidential candidates to address the issues. The Coalition for Free Air Time called upon the networks to turn over 2 to 5 minutes a night to the candidates in the month before the presidential election. Furthermore, the coalition suggested that these segments should be "roadblocked"—shown simultaneously on all networks, PBS, and interested cable stations so that people watching prime-time entertainment would be sure to see the candidates. The coalition hoped this format would promote a nightly dialogue on the issues, with candidates making news with their replies to each other's previous segments. The only requirement would be that the candidates look straight into the camera and talk. There would be no manipulation of images or unseen narrators—just candidates making their case directly to the biggest potential audience every night.

Most of the networks did eventually grant the candidates some free time in 1996, but the approach was a scattershot one. The segments varied from 1 to 2-1/2 minutes, and each network chose a different time to broadcast them. A survey done by the Annenberg School of Communication immediately after the election found that only 22 percent of registered voters even knew that the free-time effort existed. Virtually everyone involved was disappointed with the results. The results from the 2000 election were similarly disheartening, as once again the networks adopted different approaches and the audiences tended to be relatively small.

Many observers believe that the experience of the recent presidential elections has demonstrated the necessity of adopting a common format and time for all networks; some even advocate using the government's regulatory powers to force the networks to adopt this approach. Others point to the poor ratings of the televised debates as an example of the ineffectiveness of roadblocking political dialogue when the public just isn't interested. You be the policymaker. Is this an experiment that the government should mandate in future presidential elections?

Participation

Are the Media Biased?

To conclude that the news contains little explicit partisan bias is not to argue that it does not distort reality in its coverage. Former CBS News reporter Bernard Goldberg spoke for the view of many observers when he wrote in his recent best-selling book entitled *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."[43] Goldberg argues on social issues like feminism, gay rights, and welfare that the nightly news clearly leans to the left, shaped by the cosmopolitan big-city environment in which network reporters live. He asks a telling question when he writes, "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?"[44]

Ideally, the news should mirror reality; in practice there are far too many possible stories for this to be the case. Journalists must choose which stories to cover and to what degree. The overriding bias is toward stories that will draw the largest audience. As Bernard Goldberg 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."[45] Surveys show that people are most fascinated by stories with conflict, violence, disaster, or scandal, as can be seen in Table 7.2. Good news is unexciting; bad news has 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 Bush by Dan Rather concerning the Iran-Contra scandal in the 1980s, CBS's ratings actually went down as people tired of watching two talking heads argue for an extended period of time.[46] A shot of ambassadors squaring off in a fistfight at the United Nations, on the other hand, will increase the ratings. Such a scene was shown three

talking head

A shot of a person's face talking directly to the camera. Because this is visually unappealing, the major commercial networks rarely show a politician talking one-on-one for very long.

times in one day on CBS. Not once, though, was the cause of the fight discussed.[47] Network practices like these have led observers such as Lance Bennett to write that "the public is exposed to a world driven into chaos by seemingly arbitrary and mysterious forces."[48]

The News and Public Opinion

The Media and the American Public

How does the threatening, hostile, and corrupt world often depicted by the news media shape what people believe about the American political system? This question is difficult to answer. Studying the effects of the news media on people's opinions and behaviors is a difficult task. 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; the cumulative effect of dozens of news stories may be important.

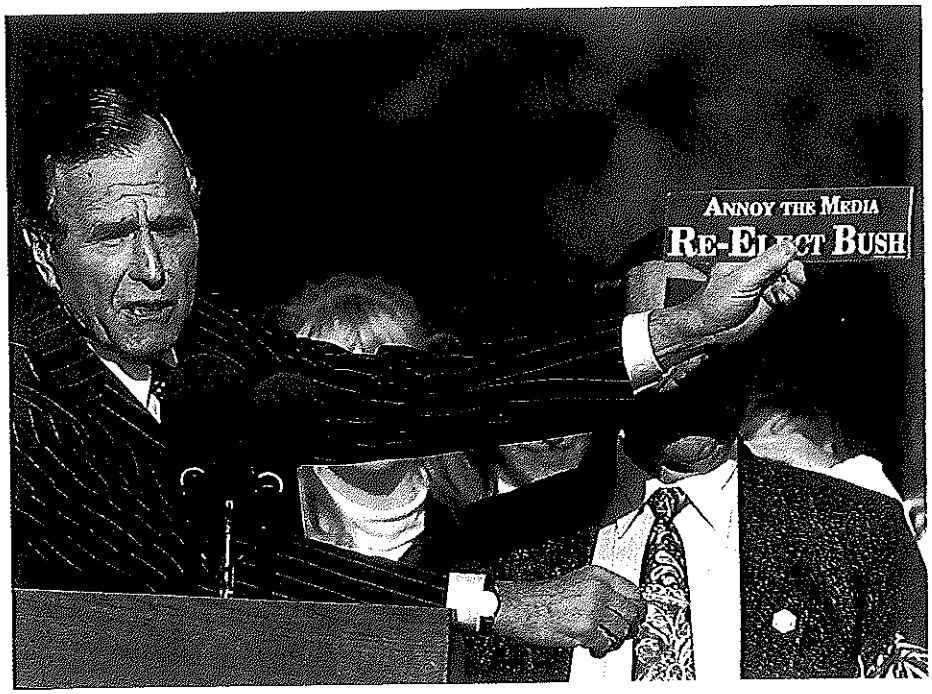
For many years, students of the subject tended to doubt that the media had more than a marginal effect on public opinion. The "minimal effects hypothesis" stemmed from the fact that early scholars were looking for direct impacts—for example, whether the media affected how people voted.[49] When the focus turned to how the media affect *what Americans think about,* more positive results were uncovered. In a series of

Table 7.2 Stories Citizens Have Tuned in and Stories They Have Tuned out

Since 1986, the monthly survey of the Pew Research Center for the People and 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 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%
San Francisco earthquake	73%
Los Angeles riots	70%
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%
Hurricane Andrew	66%
Sniper shootings near Washington, D.C.	65%
Start of hostilities against Iraq in 2003	57%
Supreme Court decision on flag burning	51%
Opening of the Berlin Wall	50%
Arrest of O. J. Simpson	48%
Nuclear accident at Chernobyl	46%
Capture of Saddam Hussein	44%
Controversy over whether Elian Gonzalez should have to return to Cuba	39%
2000 presidential election outcome	38%
Iran-Contra hearings	33%
Impeachment trial of President Clinton in the Senate	31%
Prescription drug benefit added to the Medicare program	25%
2004 Republican National Convention	22%
Release of President Bush's education plan in 2002	21%
Congressional debate about NAFTA	21%
Passage of the Communications Deregulation Bill	12%
Election of Ariel Sharon in Israel in 2001	9%
2003 Supreme Court decision upholding campaign finance reform	8%

Source: The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press.



Conservative Republicans often criticize the media for being biased against them. Studies have indeed shown that TV and newspaper reporters are more likely to be liberals than conservatives. However, there is little evidence that the personal views of reporters influence their coverage.

controlled laboratory experiments, Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder subtly manipulated the stories participants saw on the TV news.[50] 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."[51] 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 to be a credible institutional source of information.[52]

This effect has far-reaching consequences. 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 detrimental to George Bush's failed reelection attempt the same year. Similarly, the emphasis on candidate character in 2000 as opposed to the excellent economic performance under the Clinton-Gore administration clearly helped the candidacy of George W. Bush.

The media can even have a dramatic effect on how the public evaluates specific events by emphasizing one particular news aspect over all others. When the press gave substantial coverage to President Ford's misstatement about Soviet domination of Eastern Europe, 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, pro-Ford evaluations of the debate declined noticeably as voters' concerns for competence in foreign policymaking became salient.[53] Similarly, the media's focus on Al Gore's misstatements 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.[54]

Much remains unknown about the effects of the media and the news on American political behavior. Enough is known, however, to conclude that media is 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.

The Media's Agenda-Setting Function

Someone who asks you "What's your agenda?" wants to know something about your priorities. As discussed in Chapter 1, governments also 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."[55] 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, welfare reform—these and scores of other issues compete for attention from the government.

policy agenda

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

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."[56] 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.

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."

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.[57] 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 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 via the media is more important than a few dramatic events. Policy entrepreneurs—individuals or groups, in or out of government—depend on good will and good images. Sometimes it helps to hire a public relations firm that specializes in getting a specific message across. Groups, individuals, and even countries have hired public relations firms to improve their image and their ability to peddle their issue positions.[58]

Understanding the Mass Media

The 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."[59] If Cohen is right, then the growth of government in America would have been impossible without the need for it being established through the media.

The Media and the Scope of Government

The media's watchdog function helps to restrict politicians. Many observers say the press is biased against whoever holds office at the moment and that reporters want to expose officeholders. They argue that reporters hold disparaging views of most public officials and believe that they are self-serving, hypocritical, lacking in integrity, and preoccupied with reelection. Thus, it is not surprising that journalists see a need to debunk public officials and their policy proposals.

As every new proposal is met with much skepticism, regular 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. Though 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 last 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.

When the TV networks projected Al Gore to be the winner in Florida early on Election Night 2000, most observers thought he was well on his way to being declared the president-elect. When it became clear that these projections were based on faulty data and that the race was too close to call, as shown in these newspaper headlines, the national media were incredibly embarrassed. Some members of Congress have suggested regulations to prevent the media from making such erroneous projections in the future, but First Amendment considerations probably make this impossible.

Television finds it easier to focus on individuals than on groups. As a result, parties have declined, and candidate personality is more important than ever. Congress is difficult to cover on television because there are 535 members, but there is only one president; thus, as Al Gore predicted in his senior thesis (see chapter opening) the presidency has increasingly received more exposure than the Congress. Doris Graber's study of nightly news broadcasts found that 60 percent of the coverage devoted to the three branches of government was devoted to the president as compared to 37 percent for the 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 only a mere 3 percent of the coverage.

Democracy and the Media

Comparative
Comparing News Media

As Ronald Berkman and Laura Kitch remark, "Information is the fuel of democracy."[60] Widespread access to information could be the greatest boon to democracy since the secret ballot, yet most observers think it has fallen far short of this potential. Noting the vast increase in information available through the news media, Berkman and Kitch state that "If the sheer quantity of news produced greater competency in the citizenry, then we would have a society of political masters. Yet, just the opposite is happening."[61] 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 the American people wanted serious coverage of the issues, networks would be happy to give it to them. Network executives claim 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."[62] 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.

Summary

Plenty of evidence points to the power of the media in American politics. The media are ubiquitous. There is evidence that the news and its presentation are an important—perhaps the most important—shaper of public opinion on political issues. The media are an important ingredient in shaping the policy agenda, and political entrepreneurs carefully use the media for this purpose.

Gradually, the broadcast media have replaced the print media as the principal source of news. Recently, the development of cable TV channels and websites has led to narrowcasting—appealing to specific segments of the mass public rather than to the entire population. The media largely define "news" as people and events 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. With the media's superficial treatment of important policy issues, it should be no surprise that the incredible amount of information available to Americans today has not visibly increased their political awareness or participation.

Key Terms

high-tech politics
mass media
media event
press conferences
investigative journalism
print media
broadcast media
narrowcasting
chains
beats
trial balloons
sound bites
talking head
policy agenda
policy entrepreneurs

Internet Resources

www.people-press.org
The Pew Center for the People and the Press regularly surveys people regarding their attitudes toward the media's coverage of politics, and measures which news events people follow most closely.

www.appcpenn.org
The Annenberg Public Policy Center conducts studies that analyze the content of TV coverage of politics, which they post at this site.

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 their studies of the content of media coverage of politics at this site.

www.ammi.org/livingroomcandidate/
A great collection of classic and recent political commercials from 1952 through 2004.

Get Connected

Campaign Advertising

Today's political campaigns rely heavily on campaign advertising to reach voters. Television stations also appear to rely on political campaigns to produce revenue for the station. The Alliance for Better Campaigns found that local television stations increased the prices of candidate ads in the two months before the 2002 elections. How much did candidates in your state spend on political advertising?

Search the Web

Go to the "In Your State" page at the Alliance for Better Campaigns' website at *http://freeairtime.org/docs/index.php?DocID=21*. Look at how much the TV stations you watch earned from political advertising. Compare that amount with the amounts in neighboring states.

Questions to Ask

- How much money did your local television stations earn from campaign advertising?
- How does this compare to the amount of money stations in neighboring states earned? What might explain the differences you find?
- The Alliance for Better Campaigns advocates providing free air time for candidates. You can read about this proposal on the organization's web page. Does it sound like a good idea to provide free air time to candidates?

Why It Matters

In order for voters to make informed decisions in a world with increasingly complicated issues, more detailed information is necessary. Often sound bites don't provide enough information or the right kind of information. The costs of television advertising sometimes cause candidates to end their campaigns and some candidates can't afford to advertise on television. If television is the primary way that most voters get political information, it is possible that some candidates' messages may not be heard.

Get Involved

Do you agree or disagree with the Alliance for Better Campaigns' goals? Send them an e-mail to let them know. The Alliance lists their state partner organizations on their web page. Contact these state organizations to find out what they are doing in your state.

To see more Get Connected exercises for Chapter 7, go to www.ablongman.com/edwards.

For Further Reading

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