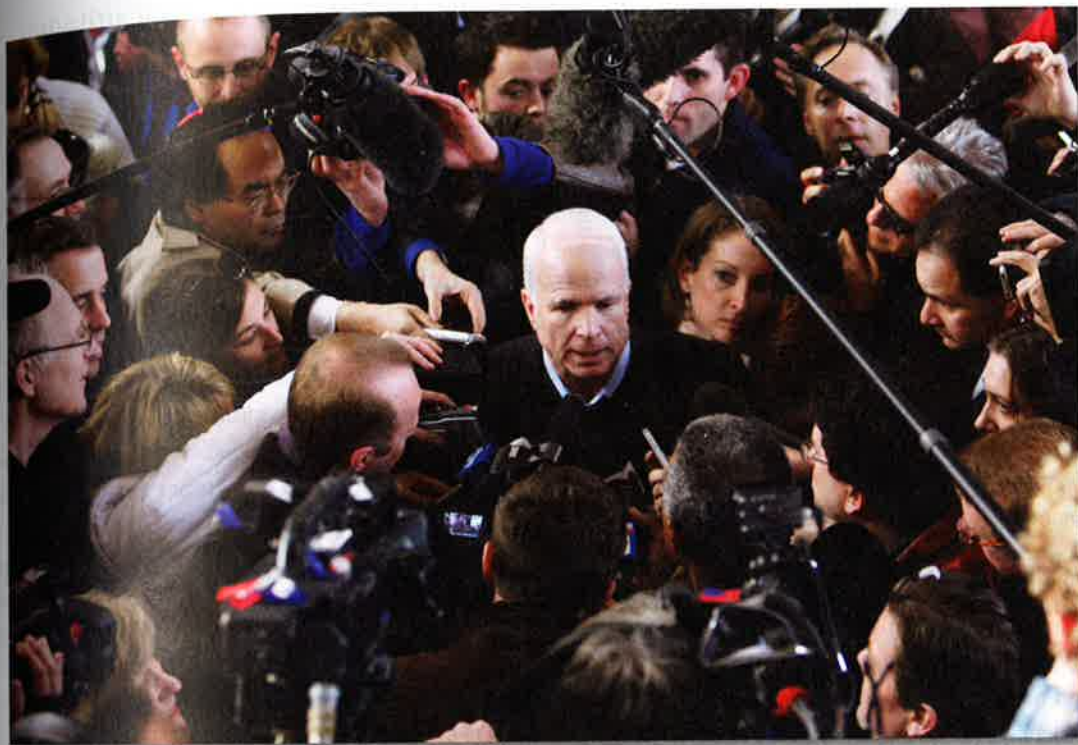


9

The Media



CHAPTER OUTLINE

Development of the Mass Media

- The Partisan Press and the Penny Press
- Newspapers and Magazines, 1865–1920
- Radio and Television • The Contemporary Scene • The New Media

What Information Sources Do Americans Rely On?

Media Effects

- Agenda Setting • Priming and Framing
- How Strong Are Media Effects?

Media Biases

- Selection Bias • Professional Bias • Ideological Bias • Prospects for Change

A Word About Entertainment Media

The Media and Electoral Politics

- Campaign Coverage • The Conventions
- The Presidential Debates

Media Coverage of Government

- Emphasis on the President (and Other Personalities) • Emphasis on Conflict
- Emphasis on the Negative • The Response: Exaggerated Concern with the Media

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 9.1 Trace the development of the mass media from colonial times to the present day.
- 9.2 Identify the primary media through which Americans get their news.
- 9.3 Characterize the effects the media have on the public's political attitudes.
- 9.4 Outline the major kinds of media bias and assess criticisms of the media.
- 9.5 Illustrate the influence of entertainment media on American political attitudes.
- 9.6 Assess media coverage of the election process.
- 9.7 Assess media coverage of the government.

The Media: 800-Pound Gorilla or 98-Pound Weakling?

The national media had it all figured out. In the frenzied few days before the 2008 New Hampshire primary, an average voter following press coverage about the campaign would probably have said with a fair degree of certainty that the winners would be Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. Obama had just scored a triumphant victory in the Iowa caucuses and was making a triumphant tour of the state, drawing overflow crowds and adoring media coverage. ABC's Charlie Gibson pointed out what to most of the assembled TV anchors, radio hosts, bloggers, pundits, and newspaper writers seemed obvious: "There is talk and evidence of an Obama wave moving through this state on the eve of its primary."¹ A *New York Post* headline screamed that Obama rival Hillary Clinton's campaign was in a state of "PANIC," and even the more sedate *Washington Post* agreed that Obama had a "clear lead."²

Meanwhile, Romney was considered something of a favorite son, since he owned a summer home in New Hampshire and had served as governor of neighboring Massachusetts. He lost the Iowa caucuses to former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee, but Huckabee had only a bare-bones operation in New Hampshire and was unlikely to do well there. Romney's other main opponent, John McCain, had been written off by the press months before. In mid-2007, the McCain campaign, suffering from staffing and money problems, seemed on the verge of collapse, and the press said so. "Left for dead" seemed to be the operative characterization of McCain: MSNBC's Chris Matthews, FOX News's Chris Wallace, the *New York*

Daily News, the *Washington Post*, and others all used the phrase.³ Finally, the wealthy Romney bought twice as much television advertising time as McCain.⁴ If TV images had an effect on voters, Romney seemed to have the edge.

Considering the impressions the media conveyed, the actual primary results came as quite a surprise. McCain beat Romney and, even more surprisingly, Obama lost to Clinton by two percentage points. Voters appeared to have been indifferent to the tenor of the news coverage, and to the barrage of political advertising. Could it be that, despite all the hue and cry, the modern media have very little effect on voters?

No sooner had reporters and pundits been blindsided by the surprising outcome, however, than they came up with an explanation for it—on the Democratic side, at least—that made the media central again. The day before the primary, Hillary Clinton's eyes appeared to well with tears after a reporter asked her about how she held up under the stress of campaigning. Video of this event rocketed around the Internet and saturated news coverage for that day. In retrospect, argued many observers, this incident elicited sympathy for Clinton among voters—especially women—who had previously found it hard to identify with her. According to this explanation, rather than being ineffectual, the media were fundamental to the election outcome. "The Obama campaign calculated that they had the women's vote over the weekend," wrote columnist Maureen Dowd, "but watched it slip away in the track of her tears."⁵

So which was it? Was the three-ring media circus central to the election outcome, or did the media represent a mere sideshow? The wiser media personalities called for humility in the face of such questions. As former NBC anchor Tom Brokaw put it, "the pirouettes are amazing.

The utter confidence with which everyone had been wrong 20 minutes earlier, they have the same utter confidence about what produced this surprise. It's intellectually dishonest."⁶

Making the Connection

How powerful are the media? Are they an overwhelming force that even presidents must fear, or a lot of sound and fury that ordinary Americans ignore? The answer is that, depending on the circumstances, the media can be either of these, and everything in between. Under some conditions, the media can have extremely powerful effects on public opinion, even to the extent of determining who wins elections and what governments do. But, under other conditions, media effects are sharply limited.

We begin our analysis of the role of the media by considering how the media have attained their present position as important political actors, and what kinds of media Americans rely on for political information. We then consider two other important issues: in what ways the media—including the latest methods of communication—affect public opinion today and what types of bias characterize media reports.

Development of the Mass Media

The term **mass media** refers to forms of communication that are widely affordable and technologically capable of reaching a broad audience. Such resources have existed for less than two centuries. Their development since then has shaped American democracy because politicians engage in a never-ending struggle to control the information that reaches their constituents. Information is power, and politicians contend with media organizations for control of it. In this section, we trace the development of the major forms of mass media used to spread political information: print (newspapers and magazines) and broadcast (radio and television). We also look at the emergence of such new media as websites, blogs, and other Internet-based communications tools. In each case we focus on control of the message: Who is responsible for the information transmitted?

When Europeans first established colonies in North America, the only technology capable of reaching a mass audience was the printing press. The first newspaper in the colonies, the *Boston News-Letter*, started publication in 1704.⁷ By 1730, there were seven colonial newspapers; by 1800, there were more than 180.⁸

But these early newspapers were different from the publications we know today. Their circulation was quite limited—according to one estimate, the average newspaper in 1800 reached about 700 people—and they came out weekly or semi-weekly. It was difficult to print a large number of newspapers in a short period of time on that era's hand-operated presses. Almost all papers were sold by subscription, and few people could afford them—about 5 percent of free households in 1765—although there is some evidence that papers were passed around, read aloud, or posted in public areas.⁹

9.1

Trace the development of the mass media from colonial times to the present day.

mass media

Means of communication that are widely affordable and technologically capable of reaching a broad audience.

There was no such thing as a professional reporter, so early papers printed virtually everything they could get their hands on: official proclamations, advertisements and commercial news, letters and essays from readers, correspondence from people in other cities, news from the ships that had just arrived in port. These papers did not pursue or “dig up” stories in the way modern-day media do—a characteristic that helps explain how the Constitutional Convention of 1787 could be held behind closed doors and have virtually nothing about its deliberations appear in contemporary newspapers.

The Partisan Press and the Penny Press

The emergence and growth of political parties after the adoption of the Constitution led to a very important development in the fledgling newspaper industry: From 1787 until the Civil War almost all newspapers were openly and explicitly partisan.

Today, of course, lots of major news organizations are accused of providing slanted, partisan news, an issue we consider in detail later in this chapter. But most of these news organizations vehemently deny such charges. By contrast, for the first 70 years or so after ratification of the Constitution, almost all American newspapers were openly affiliated with one political party or another: They announced it proudly, often at the top of their mastheads, and consciously tried to bring a partisan perspective to their writing. Most of these papers also received some kind of subsidy or patronage from the party’s supporters in government.

The pattern was set very early. As soon as the division between Federalists and Democratic-Republicans started to emerge (see Chapter 8), Alexander Hamilton, the leader of the Federalists, established a newspaper to support himself and his policies. The paper was called the *Gazette of the United States*, and to make sure the paper stayed in business, Hamilton, as secretary of the Treasury, gave the paper most of the Treasury Department’s printing business. In reaction, Thomas Jefferson and his followers set up their own newspaper, the *National Gazette*. Because the State Department did not have a great deal of official printing business to offer, Jefferson put the paper’s editor, Philip Freneau, on the State Department payroll, assuring Freneau that his job “gives so little to do, as not to interfere with any other calling the person may choose.”¹⁰ As one political scientist has written about this period, “Any wall between journalistic and political enterprises was gone; editors were party leaders, served on party central committees, and gave speeches on behalf of the federal and state party slates.”¹¹

In the early 1830s, however, a new and different form of journalism emerged: the penny press. As this name implies, one major characteristic of the penny newspapers was that each day’s paper cost only one penny, compared to about six cents per copy for the more traditional, partisan papers. Technological improvements made it possible to print papers far more quickly and cheaply, and the resulting low price made the papers accessible to a larger, less educated audience. American cities were growing, and American politics had become more participatory and less elitist (see Chapter 6), so the market for the penny press expanded quickly.¹²

The penny press was very different from the old partisan press. Its writing style was simpler and less flowery. Advertising paid the bills rather than government subsidies. Because these daily newspapers had more space to fill, they began to hire reporters, people who went to city hall or the national capital in Washington and sent back regular accounts of what was going on there. Finally, although most of the penny papers had a political point of view, they also claimed to be independent in the sense that they did not take

orders from party leaders. During the Civil War, for example, Republican newspapers supported the general thrust of that party's policies, particularly its opposition to the spread of slavery. But many were quite critical of how President Lincoln was conducting the war.

Newspapers and Magazines, 1865–1920

As large cities grew, so did newspapers. By the turn of the twentieth century, every major city in the United States had multiple competing newspapers. This competition resulted in the era of so-called "yellow journalism," when newspapers eagerly exploited scandals and any story involving sex or violence in an effort to attract more readers. Two of the most notorious practitioners were Joseph Pulitzer, who owned and edited the *New York World*, and William Randolph Hearst, who owned the *New York Journal*. The worst single example of their operating style occurred in 1897 and 1898, when the *World* and *Journal* gave a great deal of highly inflammatory coverage to events in Cuba, particularly the claim that Spanish saboteurs had blown up the *Maine*, an American battleship, and thereby played a major role in getting the United States to declare war against Spain.¹³

\$50,000 REWARD.—WHO DESTROYED THE MAINE?—\$50,000 REWARD.

NEW YORK JOURNAL
AND ADVERTISER. FIRST EDITION.

NO. 3472. THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 1898.—16 PAGES. PRICE ONE CENT.

DESTRUCTION OF THE WAR SHIP MAINE WAS THE WORK OF AN ENEMY.

\$50,000!
\$50,000 REWARD!
For the Detection of the
Perpetrator of
the Maine Outrage!

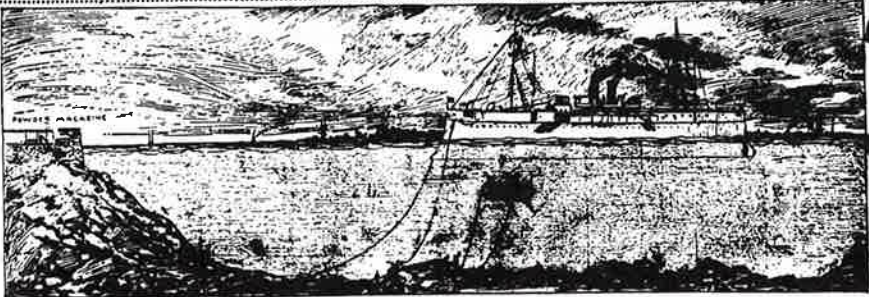
Assistant Secretary Roosevelt
Convinced the Explosion of
the War Ship Was Not
an Accident.

\$50,000!
\$50,000 REWARD!
For the Detection of the
Perpetrator of
the Maine Outrage!

The Journal Offers \$50,000 Reward for the
Conviction of the Criminals Who Sent
258 American Sailors to Their Death.
Naval Officers Unanimous That
the Ship Was Destroyed
on Purpose.

NAVAL OFFICERS THINK THE MAINE WAS DESTROYED BY A SPANISH MINE.

Hidden Mine or a Sunken Torpedo Believed to Have Been the Weapon Used Against the American Man-of-War—Officers
and Men Tell Thrilling Stories of Being Blown Into the Air Amid a Mass of Shattered Steel and Exploding
Shells—Survivors Brought to Key West Scout the Idea of Accident—Spanish Officials Pro-
test Too Much—Our Cabinet Orders a Searching Inquiry—Journal Sends
Divers to Havana to Report Upon the Condition of the Wreck.
Was the Vessel Anchored Over a Mine?



Yellow Journalism

William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal* went on the warpath after the explosion of the *Maine* in Cuba (ultimately leading to the Spanish-American War). Many people suspected that the Spanish were responsible, and Hearst's papers played on that fear.

- Compare this newspaper's coverage to the coverage of the Iraq war. How is the coverage different? How is it similar?

Although local newspapers were clearly the dominant medium of this era, national magazines were also influential. Beginning in the 1890s, entrepreneurs founded a series of new magazines aimed at the country's middle class, including *McClure's*, *Cosmopolitan*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*. After the turn of the century, magazines began publishing articles exposing political malfeasance and business abuses. This "muckraking" became a sensation, making writers such as Lincoln Steffens and Ida Tarbell famous and often prompting major reforms. The muckrakers played an important role in the Progressive movement and set an example for future journalists. Modern-day investigative reporters often model themselves after the original muckrakers.

Radio and Television

Like many modern inventions, radio has had a complex history. Although the first radio broadcast occurred in 1906, World War I delayed the use of radio for news, commercial, and entertainment purposes. After the war, radio began to flourish.¹⁴

The 1920s saw the development of three important characteristics of U.S. radio that would serve as important precedents for the future of broadcast media.

1. *The licensing system.* In the United States, government had never tried to regulate the newspaper industry: Anyone who wanted to establish a newspaper could do so, subject only to their ability to pay the bills. But radio was different. In order for radio to work, two stations could not broadcast on the same frequency: Conflicting and overlapping signals would make the medium useless. Some kind of basic order had to be imposed. But what role would government play?

In many European countries radio became a government-run enterprise. Government agencies such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in England organized the airwaves and produced radio content. But the United States decided to go a different route. By passing the Radio Act of 1927, Congress established a system that, with a few modifications, is basically still with us today—for both radio and television. The Radio Act created a Federal Radio Commission (which in 1934 became the Federal Communications Commission, or FCC) with the power to issue licenses that gave an individual or group the exclusive right to broadcast on a particular frequency. Originally, lots of licenses were granted to church groups, universities, and nonprofit organizations, but soon radio came to be dominated more and more by profit-oriented companies.

These licenses carried conditions. The legislation creating the FCC established the **equal-time rule**, which said that if a station gave or sold time to a legally qualified candidate for public office, it had to make equal time available to all such candidates, on equal terms. This rule has been modified slightly over the years, but remains in effect today. Between 1949 and 1987, the FCC also enforced a **fairness doctrine**, which required stations to air contrasting viewpoints on matters of public importance and to give public figures who had been criticized on any of the station's programs a free opportunity to reply.

2. *The importance of advertising.* In England, the BBC was funded by a tax on radio receivers, but in the United States, broadcasters had to figure out how to make money on their own. They did so by selling commercial time to advertisers. Because audience size determined advertising rates, this system gave broadcasters an incentive to build as large an audience as possible, which led to the third development.

equal-time rule

Licensing condition promulgated by the FCC requiring any station that gave or sold time to a legally qualified candidate for public office to make equal time available to all such candidates on equal terms.

fairness doctrine

FCC regulation, enforced between 1949 and 1987, that required stations to air contrasting viewpoints on matters of public importance and to give public figures who had been criticized on any of the station's programs a free opportunity to reply.

3. *The emergence of national networks.* After the initial novelty had worn off, radio broadcasters were faced with a major problem: What exactly should they broadcast, particularly if they wanted to attract and retain a large audience? It was not easy to fill 24 hours of airtime, particularly in smaller towns and cities that could not afford to hire high-priced talent.

The most important solution was the creation of national networks. A corporation, usually with headquarters in New York, would develop a lineup of programs that would then be sent by telephone wire to “affiliated” stations all over the country. Because at the time FCC rules prohibited any one entity from owning more than five stations, the network did not actually own most of the stations that ran its programs. Instead, affiliates agreed to run the programs because of the larger audience that was likely to listen to them, and in return they would give the network a portion of their precious advertising time. The first major network was the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC), created by three radio manufacturers in 1926. One year later, a group called the United Independent Broadcasters established a rival network, later named the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS). The American Broadcasting Company (ABC) began operations in 1943.

With the advent of radio it became clear that in theory, at least, it was possible to send pictures as well as sounds over the airwaves. The first public demonstration of television took place at the New York World’s Fair in 1939. World War II put plans for developing television as a commercial medium on hold, but once the war was over, television took off. In May 1949, according to a Gallup Poll, just 6 percent of Americans owned a television set—and less than half of the public had ever seen a television program. But the number of Americans who owned a TV jumped to 45 percent in 1952, and to 90 percent in 1959. In just ten years, television went from being a technological curiosity to a fixture in American homes.¹⁵

The Contemporary Scene

The contemporary American political system is served by a large and growing variety of media, each of which is used in distinctive ways and for somewhat different purposes.

Television When Americans hear the word “media,” they think first of television: Ninety-nine percent of all U.S. households have at least one television set, and the average household has three of them.¹⁶ The radio networks migrated to television, and the three major networks—ABC, CBS, and NBC—quickly came to dominate television viewing. On any given evening in the 1960s, about 90 percent of those who were watching television were likely to be tuned in to a program on one of these networks.

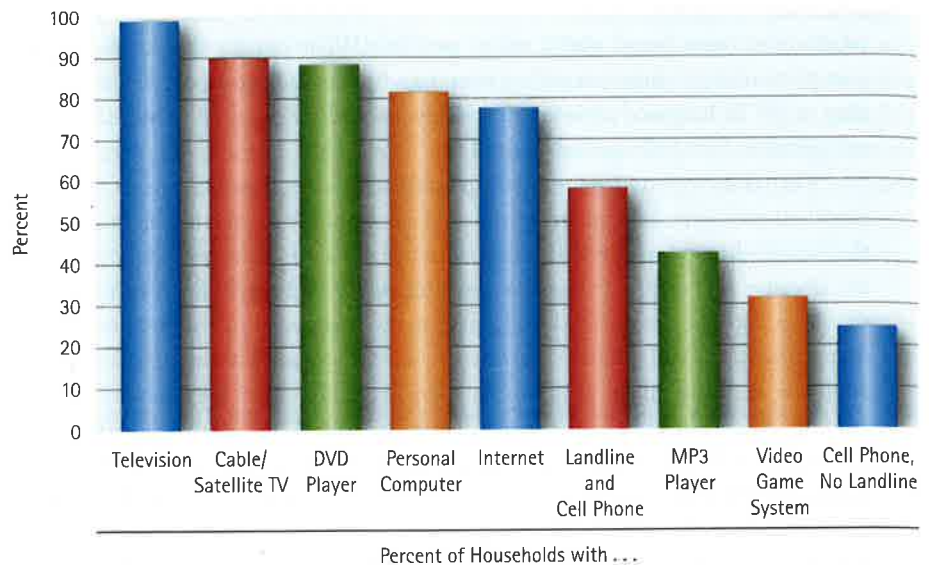
Since then, however, this near-monopoly has collapsed. The Fox network went on the air in 1986 as the first new broadcast network in decades. More importantly, cable television soared in popularity as deregulation in the early 1980s prompted entrepreneurs to create dozens of new channels. Scarcely one in five households had cable in 1980, but by the end of the decade this number had nearly tripled.¹⁷ Today about 9 out of 10 households has cable or satellite TV service, as Figure 9.1 shows.¹⁸ The networks still have larger audiences than any single cable channel, but the proliferation of channels has eroded the networks’ earlier position as the dominant force in the media environment.¹⁹

FIGURE 9.1**MEDIA ACCESS, 2009**

Nearly all households have televisions and most have Internet access.

- *How has the increasing variety of media affected political news coverage?*

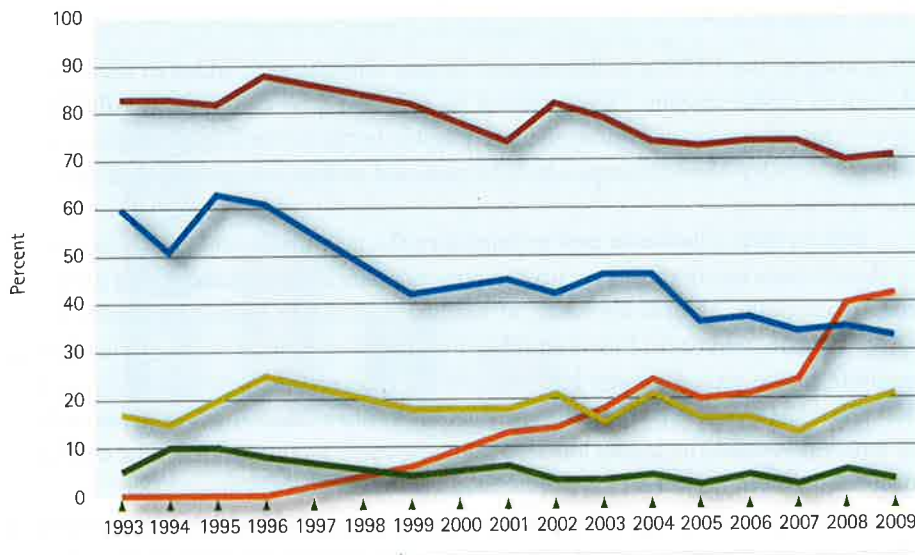
Source: Cell phones: Stephen J. Blumberg and Julian V. Luke, "Wireless Substitution: Early Release of Estimates from the National Health Interview Survey, July–September 2009," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, May 12, 2010; other information: Television Bureau of Advertising, "Media Trends Track," www.tvb.org/rcentral/mediatrendtrack/tvbasics/05_Computer-DigitalTVSales.asp, accessed June 18, 2010.



Newspapers The development of other media—first television, and later the Internet—has had a major impact on newspapers. In 1940, the United States had over 1,800 newspapers, but this figure has declined slowly but steadily: Today there are 1,400. Circulation has fallen from a peak of 63 million in 1984 to only 48 million today.²⁰ Fewer people say they rely on newspapers, as Figure 9.2 shows. Most newspapers have websites that attract many visitors, but papers have not been able to make much money off of Internet content—online ads generate less than 10 percent of what print ads do.²¹ In light of these trends, it is not surprising that profits have plummeted: In 2009, total newspaper revenues were only half of what they were just nine years earlier.²² In response to declining profits, papers have decreased the number of pages printed, laid off staff, and reined in more expensive aspects of news-gathering—such as international or investigative reporting.

Another effect of the economic trouble facing newspapers has been the spread of chain ownership. Increasingly, the nation's newspapers are owned by companies that also own a sizable number of newspapers in cities across the country. Chain ownership is not new: William Randolph Hearst, for example, at one point owned 26 daily newspapers. But where Hearst was once the exception, chain ownership is now becoming the predominant pattern. The largest single newspaper corporation is the Gannett Company, which owns *USA Today*, 83 other newspapers, and 23 TV stations. Many reporters and editors lament the new system. As one editor put it, "in corporate journalism . . . there are incessant demands on editors to be businessmen, to be community glad-handers, to be hand-holders at corporate [headquarters], and if you let the forces take their course with you, you won't be an editor and you won't be interviewing people, and you won't be doing stories."²³

Radio When MTV went on the air for the first time on August 1, 1981, the first video it aired was for the song "Video Killed the Radio Star." Yet that dire prophecy remains unfulfilled: Radio continues to be a popular medium from which many Americans get a good deal of their news.

**FIGURE 9.2****CHANGING PATTERNS IN NEWS SOURCES: 1993–2009**

Newspaper use has dropped, while Internet use has soared.

- *How would U.S. politics change—if at all—if more Americans read newspapers and fewer relied on the Internet for their news?*

Source: The Pew Center for the People and the Press, July 2009 Political Survey, <http://people-press.org/reports/questionnaires/543.pdf>.

Note: Respondents allowed to give two answers.

How do you get most of your news about national and international issues?

■ Television ■ Newspapers ■ Radio ■ Magazines ■ Internet

Note: Respondents allowed to give two answers.

Indeed, one of the most noteworthy trends in American media over the last few decades has been the growth of talk radio. In 1980, only 75 stations in the United States were devoted exclusively to news and talk shows. But after the FCC's 1987 decision to repeal the fairness doctrine, radio stations no longer had to provide free airtime to anyone who had been attacked on a particular program. As a result, talk radio boomed. By 2009, the number of news and talk stations was over 1,500.²⁴ Of course, this figure includes many nonpolitical talk shows—sports, consumer affairs, advice to the lovelorn, “shock jocks” such as Howard Stern—but much talk radio is clearly and unabashedly political. The dominant figure in the industry is Rush Limbaugh, whose three-hour show attracts 15 million listeners every week. National Public Radio has also increased its audience since 2005.²⁵ As Figure 9.2 shows, the percentage of people who say they rely on radio has remained relatively constant over time.

Radio has held its own partly because it is well adapted to consumers' needs. The average person spends 14 hours per week in a car, where radio is an ideal medium.²⁶ Radio stations have also begun broadcasting streaming audio over the Internet, as well as packaging their programs into podcasts, a format used by 22 million Americans.²⁷

Magazines Although magazines were, as we have seen, quite important in the history of American journalism, as a news source they are increasingly marginal. *Time* and *Newsweek* used to be able to influence the political discussion in Washington, but in 2010, the Washington Post Company announced that it would sell *Newsweek* because “we don't see a sustained path to profitability.”²⁸ When Americans are asked where they get most of their news, only a tiny minority mention magazines. Most magazines—and particularly the best-selling publications—are not news magazines, at least not news about government and politics. The magazine with the top circulation today is *AARP the Magazine*, which all AARP members receive automatically with their membership in the group. Also high on the list are *Reader's Digest* and *Better Homes and Gardens*.²⁹

new media

Cable and satellite TV, fax, email, and the Internet—the media that have grown out of the technological advances of the past few decades.

The New Media

Beginning in the 1970s, a sizable number of new entrants were added to the menu of American media options. Often referred to collectively as the “**new media**,” these new forms of communication were made possible by the technological advances of the past few decades. Major examples include cable and satellite television and all aspects of the Internet.

Besides their reliance on new technologies, the new media tend to have a number of shared characteristics that may have important political consequences.³⁰ In particular, they dramatically expand the range of options available to media consumers in the United States. Traditional broadcast television might have made three or four stations available to the typical viewer, but cable allows viewers to choose among more than 100 if not 1,000 different channels. The Internet similarly allows users access to millions of different websites, including hundreds of newspapers and magazines and a wide array of specialized political sites.

One important question, however, is whether people will use their new menu of choices to seek out more political information—or to avoid it altogether. In the early days of television, some scholars argued that TV had created a large “inadvertent audience” for news. Many people watched the news, not because they were really interested in it, but because it was the only thing on.³¹ Today, when there are so many more options available, it is likely that no one watches television news unless he or she wants to. One indication that younger generations may increasingly be shunning news is that the typical viewer of the main network news broadcasts is now over 62 years old.³² Thus, the new media may lead to a system in which a small number of political activists are better informed than ever before—while Americans in general are actually less knowledgeable about politics.³³

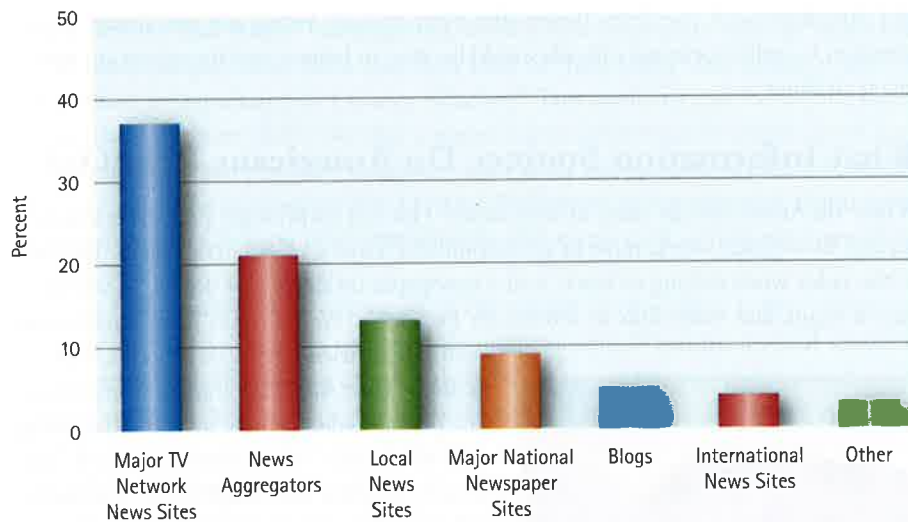
**New Media**

President Obama checks his BlackBerry before a speech.

- *How has the increased variety of media affected the way the public receives political news?*

is so fierce, media outlets sometimes resort to sensationalism and politicized perspectives to attract a larger number of consumers. Although the technology is different, this picture would be familiar to a reader of Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World* in the 1890s.

Another, somewhat more controversial characteristic of the new media is that they have, to some extent, decentralized the ownership and control of media. Whereas almost all television programs were once controlled by three national networks, cable has expanded the number of competing voices. The Internet appears to be especially “democratic,” in the sense that thousands of political groups and millions of individuals have created their own websites and thereby gained an easily accessible portal for their viewpoints. In this sense, the new media era can be thought of as similar to the era of the penny press. Media content has become cheap—and often free—to produce and consume, so media outlets have proliferated in number. Because competition

**FIGURE 9.3****INTERNET USERS TEND TO RELY ON MAINSTREAM SITES**

This graph shows the favorite sites among those who consume internet news.

• *Why do you think most people gravitate toward TV network news sites, considering the diverse array of available sources?*

Source: Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, "The State of the News Media, 2010," www.stateofthemediamedia.org/2010/online_audience.php, accessed June 17, 2010.

We should not, however, overstate the diversity in new media ownership. Many of the most important cable stations are actually owned by older media corporations that have bought or created their own cable channels. Of the three largest cable news channels, CNN is now owned by Time Warner; Fox is owned by News Corp., which also owns numerous newspapers and magazines; and MSNBC is, as its name indicates, owned by NBC. Similarly, many heavily visited political websites such as nytimes.com or cbs.com are just the Internet version of a news organization that is primarily associated with a more traditional medium. When Americans seek out news on the Internet, they typically go to a site that is operated by a major network or newspaper, as Figure 9.3 shows.

For the minority of Americans who are highly attuned to politics, the capacity of any individual to be a producer as well as a consumer of media content has opened up new doors. Political campaigns have been quick to add the new media to their repertoire of mobilization techniques. In 2008, both presidential campaigns developed social media platforms in an effort to engage committed activists in their electioneering. Fundraising has hit new highs as Internet donations have continued to increase. Campaigns can now coordinate volunteer networks across states, or even across the country, with relative ease. The Internet, as one expert put it, has become a "vital aspect of campaign strategy."³⁴

Beyond the campaigns themselves, individualized communications have also shown the potential to shake up politics in unexpected ways. Bloggers continually fact-check official statements and candidate pronouncements, sometimes uncovering embarrassing mistakes or misleading claims that can sink a candidacy or policy proposal. Gaffes delivered in unguarded moments can live on via YouTube or Twitter. In 2010, for example, when BP CEO Carl Henric-Svanberg awkwardly claimed to "care about the small people" in the wake of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, video and commentary about the statement rocketed around the web, forcing a quick apology. That same summer, Rep. Bob Etheridge (D-NC) was filmed grabbing and briefly struggling with a student videographer; after the clip made the rounds online, Etheridge issued a statement saying he "deeply and profoundly" regretted his behavior.³⁵ The ability of activists to record

and distribute such incidents shows that even though voters are not always paying attention to politics, elected officials would be wise to behave as if the voters are watching at all times.

9.2

Identify the primary media through which Americans get their news.



Web News

News agencies maintain Web pages that allow Americans to get world news immediately rather than waiting for a scheduled broadcast or for delivery of the daily paper.

- *How does this faster news cycle change the needs and expectations of consumers?*

What Information Sources Do Americans Rely On?

Where do Americans get most of their news? This is a surprisingly difficult question to answer. In a typical week, most of us encounter a variety of different media. We listen to the radio while driving to work, read a newspaper on the bus or online, watch television at night, and swap links to articles on Facebook. We may also have conversations

with family, friends, and co-workers, who tell us about what they have learned from the media, perhaps adding their own interpretations and distortions. Most people do not consciously monitor this complicated information-gathering process and therefore may not be able to say exactly what they have learned from any particular source.

When public opinion surveys ask Americans where they get most of their news, they usually say “television,” as they have since the 1960s (see Figure 9.2, page 251). The Internet overtook newspapers as the second most commonly mentioned category in 2008; newspapers are on the decline, as we discussed above, and radio is holding steady as a news source.

But there is some reason to wonder about the validity of these results. While there is no doubt that the television is on a lot in the typical American household—about 8 hours a day, according to some estimates—in many cases, no one is paying much attention to it. People are cleaning or cooking or doing their homework—and the TV is little more than background noise. Striking testimony to how little attention people sometimes give to their television sets occurred on February 7, 1971, when a power failure on the East Side of Manhattan knocked out the transmitter on the Empire State Building, which at the time was used by all the TV stations in New York City. Electric power was still working in the city, however, which meant that television sets still worked, even though they all had blank, soundless screens. Nevertheless, according to the Nielsen rating service, about a half million New Yorkers continued to leave their television sets on.³⁶

Whether because it is just background noise or because of inherent limitations in the medium itself, there is also a fair amount of evidence to indicate that even when people do watch television news, they do not retain or remember much of what they see. In one study conducted by researchers at the University of Michigan, interviewers located a random sample of respondents who said they had watched one of the network evening newscasts one to three hours earlier that day, and then asked them a series of questions about that newscast. When asked how many stories they remembered from it, the average respondent recalled fewer than two. Even when the interviewer provided a salient detail from each story, most people could remember the central point of that story only about a third of the time.³⁷

As pollster Bud Roper has suggested, because television plays such an important role in many people's lives, there may be a kind of "halo effect" that causes people to overestimate its importance as a source of news.³⁸ This tendency may be reinforced by the fact that television clearly did play a major role in informing the public about certain landmark moments in American life—such as the assassination of John F. Kennedy or the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Polls show that people paid significantly more attention to television news immediately after events such as 9/11, the start of the Iraq War, and Hurricane Katrina.³⁹

One final problem with almost all of the studies on this topic is their failure to recognize that "news" is not a very well-defined concept. When most social scientists use the term, they are thinking of news about important matters of political and social concern: recent developments in the latest election campaign, the state of the economy, the progress of various bills being considered by Congress. But many members of the mass public, we suspect, have a less exalted notion in mind. To them, news includes things such as yesterday's sports scores, the weather forecast, and the latest reports about Hollywood's hottest stars. Because the public shows a lot of interest in such matters, the increasingly competitive media environment can lead media outlets to focus more on such "soft news" items and less on "hard news" like budget negotiations or international affairs.⁴⁰ A public that pays a lot of attention to soft news may be no better informed than a public that pays a little attention to hard news.

Media Effects

Scholarly assessments of the effects of media on public opinion have gone through several distinct stages or "schools." In the 1940s many observers viewed the potential of radio as a great danger to democratic politics, for the rapid spread of radio in the 1930s coincided with the rise of Fascism in Europe. Some commentators argued that one key source of power for both Hitler and Mussolini was their ability to speak directly to their audiences. Also influential was the remarkable reaction to Orson Welles's famous *War of the Worlds* broadcast on October 30, 1938, which convinced many Americans that the planet really was being invaded by Martians and set off panic throughout the country.⁴¹ The label that has sometimes been given to this school of thought was the "hypodermic model," because the capacity of the media to put ideas into people's heads was seen as so direct and powerful, it was almost like injecting drugs into a person's bloodstream.

When social scientists first started conducting systematic tests of the media's impact on the public's attitudes, however, they found just the opposite. Particularly influential was a study called *The People's Choice*, which tracked reactions to the 1940 presidential campaign as it progressed in Erie County, Ohio. Contrary to their expectations, the study's authors found that most people wound up voting for the same candidate they had favored before the campaign began, that most of the voting decisions made by the initially "undecided" could be predicted in advance based on voters' social and demographic characteristics, and that the number of actual "conversions"—people who changed from Wilkie to Roosevelt or vice versa—was remarkably small.⁴² For the next three decades, this became the dominant view of media effects.⁴³ Known as the "minimal effects school," we would almost certainly have endorsed it if we had written this textbook in the 1950s or early 1960s—if we had bothered to write about the media at all.⁴⁴ It was not until the 1970s that a younger generation of researchers started to question the view that the media had so little effect.

9.3

Characterize the effects the media have on the public's political attitudes.

agenda setting

The media affect the issues and problems people think about, even if the media do not determine what positions people adopt.

**The CNN Effect**

News coverage of major disasters such as famine, war, and the 2010 Haiti earthquake has at times shaped the political agenda.

- *Why do the news media focus attention on some disasters and not others?*

CNN effect

Purported ability of TV to raise a foreign tragedy to national prominence by broadcasting vivid pictures.

Agenda Setting

The first major crack in the “minimal effects” edifice concerned a function known as **agenda setting**, which occurs when the media affect the issues and problems people think about, even if the media do not determine what positions people adopt. As Bernard Cohen memorably put it, the press “may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think *about*.”⁴⁵ Put another way, the media may not be able to change the *direction* of public attitudes, but it can change their relative *salience* (how important people think the issue is). The media can induce people to focus on an issue or problem by emphasizing it and whipping up their concern. The media set the agenda, even if they do not determine how issues are resolved.

Catastrophes in Third World countries, for example, largely go unnoticed unless the media—particularly television—turn their attention to such events. In the 1980s, a devastating Ethiopian famine failed to gain the attention of Americans until television beamed heartrending footage into the public’s living rooms.⁴⁶ Once the public began paying attention, voters demanded a U.S. government response. Media analysts have even given government responses such as these a nickname, the **CNN effect**, after the tendency for a foreign tragedy to be raised to national prominence once the Cable News Network covers it. As the Internet has become more widely accessible, video sites and social media have made it even easier for vivid, disturbing images to reach a wide audience, as in the case of the crackdown on demonstrators in Iran in 2009, or the Haiti earthquake in 2010.⁴⁷

Agenda setting is well documented, although much of the evidence is not conclusive.⁴⁸ When unemployment rose to near-double digits in the 2009 recession, the media focused heavily on unemployment, and polls showed that the public was concerned with the issue. Is this agenda setting, or are both the media and the people responding to the same real conditions? Some careful studies conclude that the independent impact of the media has been exaggerated; astute government officials use the media to place problems on the national and international agendas.⁴⁹ A study of healthcare reform efforts concluded that “peaks in the volume and substan-

tive focus of media reporting coincided with upsurges in discussions of real-world developments and fierce political debate over policy reforms.”⁵⁰ Nevertheless, experimental studies that raise viewer concern about subjects *not* high on the national agenda have been able to provide some evidence of agenda setting.⁵¹

Priming and Framing

In the spring of 1991, following an impressive American victory in the Gulf War, President George H. W. Bush’s approval ratings soared, reaching unprecedented levels. With the war’s end, however, journalists turned to other stories and gradually Bush’s ratings became dependent on the nation’s economic performance, which voters judged negatively.⁵² He lost the 1992 election to Bill Clinton. Similarly, President George W. Bush enjoyed soaring popularity ratings after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. During the war in Iraq, though, media coverage dwelt on the administration’s failings—including an inability to find “weapons of mass destruction” supposedly possessed by Iraq’s government. Bush’s ratings dropped steadily until the 2004 presidential campaign heated up, although he

survived his reelection bid, and then plummeted further thereafter. These large shifts in public opinion are striking reflections of **priming**—changing the standards that citizens use to evaluate their leaders.

By what they choose to cover, the media can prime citizens to use some standards rather than others.⁵³ Obviously, the media do not have full control over which criteria Americans use to evaluate their presidents. War or an economic downturn pushes everything else off the agenda of public opinion: All other concerns seem minor when lives are in danger or family members are having trouble putting food on the table. Thus, both the media and the public react to the reality of war and recession. Similarly, after the crisis ends, both turn to other concerns.

Framing and priming are related notions.⁵⁴ **Framing** has been defined as “the way in which opinions about an issue can be altered by emphasizing or deemphasizing particular facets of that issue.”⁵⁵ In Chapter 5 we explained that Americans tend to shift their opinions on abortion depending on how pollsters frame the question. How issues are framed shapes more than just survey results, however; framing also molds how the public thinks about issues more generally. For example, the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill might be framed in a number of different ways. It could be thought of as a failure of government to respond adequately to a disaster; the failure of a company to act responsibly in guarding against mistakes; an illustration of the need to move away from oil as a source of energy; or an illustration that more accessible land-based oil reserves are a better bet than deep sea reserves. Which frame you accept will have a significant impact on your evaluation of President Obama, of BP, and of energy policy in the United States. Inducing people to think along certain lines rather than others can affect their positions on issues and their evaluations of public officials.

How Strong Are Media Effects?

Effects such as agenda setting, priming, and framing depend on both the characteristics of the audience and the nature of the information. People who are uninterested in and uninformed about politics are most susceptible to agenda setting. For example, political independents differ from partisans. Their concerns shift from one issue to another with the intensity of media coverage. Partisans, on the other hand, are inclined to think in terms of issues at the core of their party's concerns.⁵⁶

The characteristics of the information being communicated are at least as important as the characteristics of the people receiving it. When the problem or event is far away—well beyond personal experience—the mass media provide the only information available. Their influence diminishes when information is closer to home and people have some personal basis for arriving at opinions.⁵⁷ When reporters were predicting an Obama victory in the 2008 New Hampshire primary, they may have convinced viewers watching from out of state, but they were less likely to sway New Hampshire voters, most of whom had thought more about the race and had made up their minds before the early January Obama “wave.” Thus, the media *can* have a major impact on public opinion, but *whether* they do so depends on both whom they are reaching and what they are covering.

We also live in a world in which there are many different media sources telling many different stories. A voter may therefore receive a variety of “frames” that may cancel each other out or change over time, or may diminish as people talk with their friends and neighbors about the news.⁵⁸ These complex effects are difficult to sort out and are not yet well understood.

priming

The media affect the standards people use to evaluate political figures or the severity of a problem.

framing

The way in which opinions about an issue can be altered by emphasizing or de-emphasizing particular facets of that issue.

9.4

Outline the major kinds of media bias and assess criticisms of the media.

selection principle

Guideline according to which stories with certain characteristics are chosen over stories without those characteristics.

Media Biases

Most modern journalists purport to be objective. They are supposed to report events and describe conflicts accurately so that voters can make informed judgments. If reporters and editors lived up to this ideal, then media effects would not be much cause for concern. But news organizations and other media corporations represent important players in the political system, an institution with its own interests, values, and operating procedures. The result, almost all observers agree, is that the news we get through television, newspapers, and magazines is far from being a full, faithful, and undistorted reflection of what is going on in the world around us. In all sorts of major and minor ways, the media fall short of providing a “mirror” of reality.

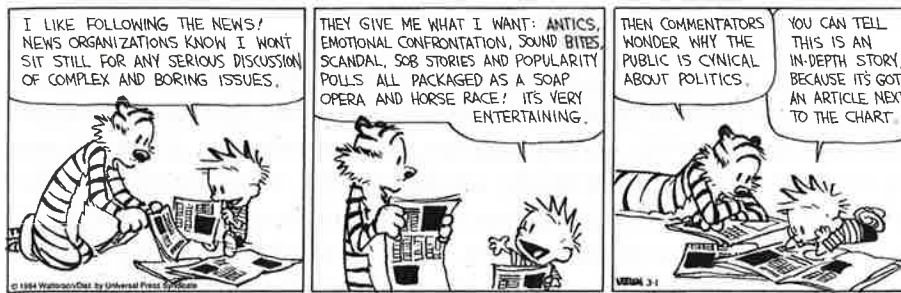
Selection Bias

Periodically, frustrated citizens write to newspaper editors to complain that all their newspaper ever publishes is bad news. Why not more good news? The answer is that to a considerable extent, the media *define* news as bad news.⁵⁹ A government program that works well is not news; one that is mismanaged or a failure *is* news. An elected official who is doing a good job is not newsworthy; one who is incompetent or corrupt is. People working hard and contributing to their communities are not news; one sociopath who runs amok is. An emphasis on the negative is a kind of **selection principle**, a guideline according to which stories with certain characteristics are chosen over stories without those characteristics; reporters and editors give a skewed perception of reality based on the way they make decisions about what stories to cover.

Media critic Larry Sabato argues that the negative tone of the media has become much more prominent in recent decades. He contends that presidents from Franklin Roosevelt to John F. Kennedy enjoyed the support of a press with a “lapdog” mentality. Johnson and Nixon were subjected to far greater scrutiny by a press with a “watchdog” mentality. Succeeding presidents, he maintains, suffer mean treatment from a press with a “junkyard dog” mentality.⁶⁰ Some observers believe that the negative tone of press coverage has contributed to the increased cynicism of the American public about politics and government.⁶¹ They suggest that politics today is no worse than in previous eras—it might even be better—but that media treatment makes things *seem* worse.

Another important selection principle is that “news” must be new, exciting, and unusual. Gradual developments and persistent conditions do not lend themselves to the kind of hit-and-run coverage favored by the contemporary media. A crisis does. President Obama did his best to keep news about ongoing economic stimulus programs on front pages in 2010, but coverage of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill saturated most media outlets.

The media look for heroes and villains, not for abstract social developments. This bias is particularly characteristic of TV, which is even more fast-paced than print. A frequently heard maxim to describe local TV news is “If it bleeds, it leads.” TV needs dramatic events, colorful personalities, bitter conflicts, short and snappy comments, and above all, compelling pictures. The result can be insufficient treatment of stories that do not fit the needs of the media and distorted treatment of stories that are covered to make them fit those needs.⁶² In 2010, an unprecedented flood struck Nashville, Tennessee, killing more than 30 people and destroying countless homes. But the national media largely ignored the story because it was focused on the other big



Calvin and Hobbes

As the public gets more reports of scandal and problems, some worry that the electorate grows more cynical.

- Does excessive coverage of scandal “packaged as a soap opera and horse race” lead the public to distrust government and politicians?

Calvin and Hobbes © Watterson.
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story that same week: an attempted car bombing in Times Square, New York. Terrorism was just too hot a story to resist. As one Tennessee journalist lamented, “if this had happened in another week, it would have been the flavor du jour.”⁶³

Selection biases probably colored the media’s coverage of the 2008 financial crisis, an economic panic caused in part by risky and complex securities such as derivatives and credit default swaps that few members of the public understood. As a result, coverage mostly focused on more understandable topics, such as instances of actual fraud, high CEO salaries, and the shocking volatility of the Dow Jones Industrial Average. When automakers faced bankruptcy, media outlets played up a minor scandal in which executives took private jets to Washington for a Congressional hearing, rather than flying commercial. None of this had much to do with the causes of the crisis or with the major proposals for propping up the economy or for reforming the financial system. But it did make for a better story than an explanation of how ratings agencies judge the level of risk in particular collateralized debt obligations.

Some critics charge that the media desire for heroism and action—along with their desire for popularity—especially distorts the coverage of war and foreign affairs. Such criticism is not new. As early as 1966, one detractor wrote:

Our remaining correspondents fly from earthquake to famine, from insurrection to massacre. They land running, as we were all taught to do, and they provide surprisingly good coverage of whatever is immediately going on . . . [But] we miss anticipation, thought, and meaning. Our global coverage has become a comic book: ZAP! POW! BANG-BANG.⁶⁴

During the war in Iraq, both the pro- and antiwar sides complained about the slant of war reporting. In the early stages of the war, such complaints were most frequently voiced by those on the left. Many critics argued that the media were “shirking their duty” to keep an eye on government and instead had become boosters of military aggression. “Regardless of their own views on the war,” according to Mark Weisbrot, co-director of the liberal Center for Economic and Policy Research, “American journalists became the Bush administration’s major means of promoting it.” The director-general of the British Broadcasting Corporation, meanwhile, expressed his shock at “gung-ho” war coverage, charging that reporters had “wrapped themselves in the American flag and swapped impartiality for patriotism.” Beginning in about 2003, however, the tenor of most American war reporting became sharply more critical, leading to complaints from Republicans that the media were devoting too much attention to casualties and setbacks in Iraq and not enough to the many positive developments. As with public opinion, media coverage may be very supportive of an administration early in a foreign policy crisis, and less so as time passes.

Professional Bias

A second kind of media bias arises from the demands of the journalism profession today. A few journalists are experts who work specific “beats”—the business reporter, education reporter, health reporter, Supreme Court reporter, and so on. But most reporters and journalists are generalists who lack specific substantive expertise. They operate on tight deadlines and start from scratch on many stories. Thus, on subjects more complex than scandals and conflicts, they are dependent on experts and other outside sources for information and interpretation. Ironically, despite the familiar image of the investigative reporter, studies find that reporters uncover only a small fraction of the scandals they report—probably less than one-quarter.⁶⁵ Government agencies reveal the lion’s share, and they generally do so officially, not through surreptitious “leaks.” Reliance on government sources can make a big difference in news coverage and helps explain why U.S. news often differs sharply from the information available in other countries.

Moreover, as journalists themselves recognize, the news media have increased their emphasis on entertainment.⁶⁶ Especially in the case of TV, looks and personalities are more important today than they were a generation ago. With the growth of the new media, competitive pressures are greater than ever and have resulted in a race to the bottom, as network news becomes more like infotainment (a mixture of news and entertainment) and major newspapers become more like tabloids. Each time a tabloid website beats a major news outlet to a story, as the site TMZ.com did when it scooped major news outlets by being the first to report the death of pop star Michael Jackson, this competitive pressure intensifies.

The lack of internal expertise and the competitive pressure for ratings and sales contribute to an unattractive feature of modern political coverage: “pack journalism,” in which reporters unanimously decide something is the big story and attack it like wolves tearing apart wounded prey or sharks engaging in a feeding frenzy.⁶⁷ Comedian Jon Stewart prefers a different image: small children playing soccer, all clumped together and thoughtlessly chasing a ball.⁶⁸ Normal people, observing such behavior, are puzzled by the media’s pack behavior—but to journalists under great competitive pressure, there is safety in numbers. One can hardly be faulted for working on the same story as are other prominent journalists. Far better to focus on what turns out to be an overblown, inconsequential story than to “run the risk of going down in history as ‘the reporter who missed the next Watergate.’”⁶⁹ Indeed, there is every indication that the “pack” mentality extends to editorial offices, where each news show or newspaper fears missing the “next big thing.” The “pack” phenomenon is not unique to professional journalists either: Social networking sites like Twitter explode with repostings of similar stories, eyewitness accounts, and flat-out rumors when a crisis strikes. The accuracy of this information is often suspect, but there is significant pressure to post information immediately and sort out the facts later.

Ideological Bias

The first two kinds of media bias described here are, by most accounts, nonideological. The media report scandals, disasters, and stories with good pictures pretty much regardless of whether such stories benefit liberals or conservatives. The media showed great enthusiasm for reporting the Watergate scandals that brought down a Republican

president—but they also salivated over every juicy detail of the Clinton sex scandals, when a Democrat was in the White House. Liberals often charge that public support for domestic programs is weakened because the media report program failures but not successes. But business people often make the same sort of complaint: Corporate corruption and mistakes get covered, but not the many products and services that work or the millions of people who are productively employed. Accusations of media bias are not unique to U.S. media outlets, as the International Comparison illustrates.

Yet many thoughtful media critics think the American media also have important ideological biases that systematically favor politicians and causes from one end of the ideological spectrum. What the critics do not agree about, however, is who benefits from this media malfeasance. Conservatives have long charged that the media have a liberal bias; liberals insist (although a bit less vociferously) that the media favor conservatives. For a variety of reasons, academic research has been equally divided about this question. Some books and articles by reputable scholars claim to find evidence documenting that the media do, indeed, have a liberal bias.⁷⁰ Others argue that the media are especially deferential to established interests in both government and business.⁷¹ Still others insist that both sides are wrong and that while the media undoubtedly have their problems and shortcomings, the major political parties and ideologies are generally treated about the same.⁷²

The clearest evidence supporting the case of critics who charge the media with having a liberal bias is the attitudes and opinions of professional journalists. Since the early 1960s, a number of scholars and polling organizations have conducted surveys of the reporters, editors, and producers at major news organizations. Without exception, these studies have found that those who report and edit the news are substantially more liberal than the American public, particularly on social and cultural issues such as abortion, affirmative action, and gay rights.⁷³ The liberal tilt of American journalists shows up particularly strongly in their voting habits. In a study conducted by the University of Connecticut, 68 percent of a sample of newspaper and television journalists reported voting for John Kerry in 2004; just 25 percent reported voting for George W. Bush.⁷⁴ In 2007, a report on MSNBC used Federal Election Commission records to find 143 journalists who had made political contributions to federal candidates or political action committees between 2004 and the start of the 2008 campaign: whereas 125 gave to Democrats and liberal causes, just 16 gave to Republicans and conservatives.⁷⁵

An exception to this pattern is talk radio, which is dominated by people who are clearly and unabashedly conservative. Every year, *Talkers* magazine, a trade publication that serves the talk radio industry, compiles a list of the top talk radio programs in the United States and their cumulative weekly audience. As of 2009, all but one of the top 10 talk radio hosts were conservative or libertarian. The tenth was nonpolitical financial commentator Dave Ramsey. The most significant reason for this result is that conservatives feel they need an alternative to the so-called mainstream media. Public opinion surveys have shown quite consistently over the past few decades that a lot more Americans believe that the media have a liberal bias than believe that they are biased in the other direction.⁷⁶

Liberals retort that what matters is not the political views of the journalists, but the kinds of organizations they work for. In the contemporary United States, news is produced by large, for-profit corporations engaged in a relentless struggle to improve their profit margins. As a result, liberals claim, the news tends to be especially docile and deferential towards business interests, especially those that are major advertisers.⁷⁷

In addition, the news gathering process is structured around official government sources. A news organization is more likely to assign a reporter to cover the White House, the Congress, and the Pentagon on a regular basis than it is to cover labor unions, antiwar protestors, or consumer groups. Thus, most news comes from so-called “official sources,” while the more severe critics of official policy rarely, if ever, get their views into print or on the airwaves.

It would seem that this controversy could be settled by examining the content of news reports and determining what biases, if any, they actually possess. But this is easier said than done. Part of the problem is that most allegations of media bias claim that some person or policy is getting more favorable or unfavorable coverage *than it deserves*—media coverage, in other words, is compared to reality—and often there is considerable disagreement as to how bad a problem is or how well or poorly some official has performed. From 2004 through 2006, for example, American policy and performance in Iraq received a good deal of negative coverage. Conservative critics charged that the media were giving a misleading picture of the state of affairs in Iraq; journalists replied that



INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON

Al Jazeera—Questionable Sources?

As Americans tuned in during the fall of 2001 to follow the war on terrorism, they were introduced to the “The CNN of the Arab World”: Al Jazeera.¹ In early 2001, Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times* had described Al Jazeera as the “freest” cable network in the Arab world even though it received significant support from the government of Qatar. Aggressive marketing, lively debate and—according to Friedman—“uncensored” news stories attracted large blocs of viewers. Al Jazeera not only styled itself after Western news organizations, but actually was allied with CNN to provide content (the two networks have since severed their relationship).²

After 9/11, Al Jazeera provided CNN with video footage of al Qaeda training camps. The network’s most controversial contribution, however, was a broadcast of Osama Bin Laden speaking in a very threatening manner about the decadent West. Secretary of State Colin Powell denounced Al Jazeera’s “vitriolic, irresponsible” statements. Then—national security adviser Condoleezza Rice asked U.S. networks not to broadcast Bin Laden’s speeches.³ Originally heralded for its unprecedented access to news sources unavailable to American media outlets, the station increasingly faced criticism because of the perception that it had become too closely tied to those same sources. U.S. officials viewed Al Jazeera’s coverage of the Iraq War, for example, as overly sympathetic to the Iraqi government.

Al Jazeera launched an English language channel in 2006 and attempted to break into the U.S. cable market. But U.S.

cable providers shunned the network as too controversial, even as the network expanded to reach over 200 million people in Europe, Africa, and elsewhere. Meanwhile, Al Jazeera continued to provide unmatched coverage of events in the Middle East, such as the 2009 war between Israel and Gaza and the 2010 interception of a Gaza-bound flotilla by Israeli troops.⁴ Accusations of bias continued: Egypt accused Al Jazeera of being overly sympathetic to that country’s anti-government Muslim Brotherhood; Israel and its allies argue that the network is too cozy with the radical Islamist group Hamas.⁵

- *Was Al Jazeera wrong to broadcast tapes of Osama Bin Laden’s threats? Should American stations have rebroadcast these speeches?*
- *Does the reluctance of U.S. cable providers to carry Al Jazeera English suggest that corporate control is a key source of bias, as liberals claim? Or does it simply reflect market forces?*

¹T. Straus, “The CNN of the Arab World,” *Alternet.org*, October 26, 2001.

²Thomas L. Friedman, “The Fast Eat the Slow,” *New York Times*, February 2, 2001, Associated Press, “Arab Network Cuts Ties with CNN,” February 1, 2002.

³Straus, “The CNN of the Arab World.”

⁴Aaron Barnhart, “Al-Jazeera English Relocates to the U.S. Border, Ready to Invade,” *Kansas City Star*, June 9, 2010, <http://www.kansascity.com/2010/06/09/2003811/al-jazeera-english-relocates-to.html>, accessed June 22, 2010.

⁵“Al Jazeera: More Powerful than Ever,” *The Economist*, May 27, 2010, http://www.economist.com/node/16222710?story_id=16222710&source=hptextfeature, accessed June 22, 2010.

things were, in fact, just as bad as they were being portrayed. It is difficult to imagine an “objective measure of conditions” that would definitively settle this kind of dispute.

Media biases, moreover, can manifest themselves in a variety of more subtle ways. Political scientist Martin Gilens has found, for example, that when news organizations need to choose a photograph of a “poor person,” they disproportionately select photos of African Americans, despite the fact that most poor people in the United States are white.⁷⁸ There may be many such subtle biases in media coverage, but media studies have not done as thorough a job of studying such biases in objective ways.

Prospects for Change

However justified, criticisms of the media’s coverage of politics and government miss an important point. The news media in the United States are not part of the public education system. As one journalist commented, “What few people recognize is that the purpose of the media is not to educate, it is to impress—to make an impression. There isn’t the time or space to educate.”⁷⁹

As for complaints that their coverage falls short of what many would like to see, defenders of the media respond that they try to provide the kind of coverage people want, to the point of using focus groups and other measures of reader interest to serve the audience better.⁸⁰ A survey in April 2010, for example, found that the top four topics of interest to the public were the economy, the ash plume from an Icelandic volcano that was disrupting air travel, the oil rig explosion in the Gulf of Mexico, and financial reform. Analysis of news coverage showed that these were exactly the topics to which the media were devoting the most attention at the time.⁸¹ Nonetheless, Americans are not happy with media behavior today. As Table 9.1 shows, popular evaluations of the media have declined sharply since the mid-1980s.

Furthermore, media representatives have always claimed that they are more than profit-making businesses. They claim to provide an essential public service. When they publish sensitive or private information, they justify their behavior with more than a sprinkling of righteousness—using weighty terms such as “the public’s right to know” or “the free flow of information in the marketplace of ideas.” Such an exalted self-image may carry with it the responsibility to give the public what it needs as well as what it wants.

TABLE 9.1
EVALUATIONS OF THE MEDIA HAVE WORSENE

	1985	1999	2009
Percent of those polled saying news organizations generally . . .			
Get the facts straight	55	37	29
Deal fairly with all sides	34	27	18
Are pretty independent	37	23	20
Are unbiased	36	31	26

Source: Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, “July 2009 Political Survey/Media Update,” <http://people-press.org/reports/questionnaires/543.pdf>, accessed June 17, 2010.

9.5

Illustrate the influence of entertainment media on American political attitudes.

A Word About Entertainment Media

The principal subject of this chapter has been the *news* media: those forms of media that claim to provide reports or commentary about real-world events and conditions. Yet much of what are thought of as entertainment media—movies, situation comedies, detective shows, soap operas—may also contain material that has significant political implications. Over the last 20 years, for example, American attitudes toward homosexuality have become significantly more tolerant and even approving, in ways that have important consequences for such issues as gay rights and same-sex marriage (see Chapter 17). And, while this change has probably taken place for a number of reasons, one major source has almost certainly been the way that gay and lesbian characters are portrayed in movies and on television. Not only are such characters a good deal more visible than they once were; gay and lesbian characters are usually portrayed quite positively, while those who are critical of or opposed to homosexuality are condemned or ridiculed.

To take another example, during and after World War II, Hollywood produced a significant number of war movies, almost all of which made clear, implicitly or explicitly, that the United States was the good guy while the Germans and Japanese were the enemy. Although individual American soldiers or generals might have their faults, there was no doubting the justice of the American cause. By contrast, recent movies and documentaries about the war in Iraq and U.S. policies in the Middle East have been strikingly critical of the United States. Now the American side may commit atrocities or have corrupt motives, while Iraqis or Arabs can be portrayed as reasonable and peaceful. *Redacted*, for example, is about the rape and murder of an Iraqi girl by U.S. troops. *Lions for Lambs* is about how a cynical Republican senator devises a new war strategy that ultimately sends two idealistic young soldiers to their senseless deaths. Given the limited attention that many Americans give to news programming, entertainment media may be an important, additional source of influence on American political attitudes.

9.6

Assess media coverage of the election process.

The Media and Electoral Politics

The mass media play an important role in democratic politics. Ideally, they transmit information about problems and issues, helping voters make intelligent choices among the candidates who compete for their votes. But many critics feel that the biases and shortcomings discussed earlier cause media coverage of elections to fall far short of the ideal.

Campaign Coverage

Nowhere do critics of the mass media find more to criticize than in the coverage of political campaigns. Numerous studies report that the various media biases combine to produce campaign coverage that is characterized by sins of both omission and commission (see Chapter 10).

The media provide little coverage of policy issues: the nature of social and economic problems, the contrasts among the programs that candidates advocate, and so forth. Instead, critics charge, the media devote too much attention to “character” issues that have little to do with the ability of the candidates to govern. Thus the press dwells on whether Barack Obama is too aloof or whether John McCain is too hot-tempered. Such matters have some relevance, to be sure, and they may provide some indication of how a candidate would govern, but reporting on such matters should not crowd out more substantive election coverage.

Not only do the media concentrate on candidates' characters at the expense of genuine policy and performance issues, but their interest primarily stems from a wish to handicap each race. Campaign coverage usually focuses on an election as though it were a horse race, reporting which candidate is leading, which candidate is dropping back, which one is coming up on the rail, what the latest polls say, who got what endorsement, and how a change in campaign personnel will affect public perceptions of the candidate. Even when a candidate announces a proposal or issue position, it is evaluated as a tactical move that can affect the candidate's standing in the larger horse race. This tendency toward "horse-race coverage" has become much more pronounced over the past generation, as the attention devoted to substance has declined.⁸²

Another important characteristic of television election coverage, which is actually a recent development, is the extent to which it centers around the reporter rather than the candidates. According to a study conducted by sociologist Kiku Adatto, in 1968 the media allowed candidates to present their views in their own words. The average **sound bite**—a piece of film or video that shows the candidate speaking in his or her own words—lasted for 42 seconds. By 1988, the average sound bite was just 10 seconds.⁸³ In other words, rather than allowing the candidates to speak for themselves, journalists increasingly assumed that it was their responsibility to summarize, edit, and interpret the candidates' words. Knowing this, the candidates began to deliver speeches that reduced complex ideas and issues to one or two pithy, oversimplified sentences. And, although the networks vowed to change this aspect of their coverage, subsequent studies have shown that television sound bites have actually grown shorter—down to an average of 7.8 seconds in 2004.⁸⁴

Observers of contemporary political campaigns are not the only ones who are critical of media coverage. The candidates themselves are critical—so much so that they are finding ways to get around the contemporary media. As noted earlier, they have started appearing on popular television programs. They also make themselves available more frequently to state and local journalists. Reporters of national stature complain that the candidates are insulating themselves from the hard questioning of seasoned journalists, but the candidates **seem to enjoy the opportunity to talk about issues rather than the trivia that often dominates national news coverage**. Candidates have also increasingly used video sites like **YouTube to share speeches and statements that exceed the average TV sound bite length** by multiple orders of magnitude. This strategy became so popular that in 2010, Google and YouTube introduced a specialized suite of online tools for use by political campaigns.⁸⁵

The Conventions

Before presidential candidates were chosen in the primaries, national conventions were important political events. Party leaders came together, made deals, hammered out a platform, nominated candidates, and (if successful) left with a unified party prepared to battle the opposition. In recognition of the importance of the conventions, CBS and NBC provided gavel-to-gavel coverage from 1956 to 1976 and regularly assigned their top anchors and reporters to the events.

The process for nominating presidential candidates was changed in 1972, in ways that removed the element of surprise from national party conventions (see Chapter 10). Since then, the conventions have not been nearly so important as in earlier eras, and media coverage has dropped accordingly (see Figure 9.4). As magazine writer Hendrik Hertzberg dryly put it, the "conventions are no longer troubled by the problem of being excessively

sound bite

A piece of film or video that shows a candidate speaking in his or her own words.

FIGURE 9.4**THE NETWORKS
INCREASINGLY IGNORE THE
NATIONAL POLITICAL
CONVENTIONS**

This graph shows the average coverage of each party's convention.

- *Do the major broadcast television networks have some kind of civic obligation to televise at least some parts of the national political conventions?*

Source: Adapted by Sam Abrams from Harold W. Stanley and Richard G. Niemi, *Vital Statistics of American Politics, 2005–2006* (Washington, DC: QC Press), 195.



interesting.”⁸⁶ The parties now treat the conventions as huge infomercials in an attempt to take advantage of their diminishing time on the screen. Attractive speakers are slotted for prime time, and the entire convention schedule is arranged with the media in mind.

The parties showcase their candidates in hopes of producing a post-convention “bounce” upward in the polls. Recent conventions that produced large bounces for the candidates were the 2004 Republican convention (for President Bush) and the 2000 Democratic convention (for Vice President Gore).⁸⁷ John McCain received a significant bounce from the 2008 Republican convention, but this advantage dissipated quickly. Media coverage is a double-edged sword, however. If coverage emphasizes a divided party or unpopular elements of the party, it will cause the candidate to drop in the polls. In 1992 Pat Buchanan gave an aggressive speech to the Republican convention that reportedly turned off many moderates.

The conventions probably will be even less important in the future. As one commentator observed after the 1996 events, “The more the party managers tried to package their message to please television, the less the major networks were interested.”⁸⁸ About 38 million Americans watched convention speeches by Barack Obama and John McCain in 2008, a figure that is about comparable to an American Idol finale, smaller than the number of viewers who watched Michael Phelps set the record for gold medal wins at the 2008 Olympics (40 million), and far short of the number of people who watched the 2010 Superbowl (106 million).⁸⁹ This is probably a high-water mark for modern convention viewership because of the unusually interesting race and the lack of an incumbent candidate.

The Presidential Debates

One of the high points of modern presidential campaigns is the series of debates between the two—and in one case, three—major candidates. No other campaign events earn such high ratings. In fact, more people watch the debates than vote.

The first televised debates were held during the 1960 campaign between candidates Richard M. Nixon and John F. Kennedy. One of the surprising findings in studies of the debates was that people who listened to them on the radio evaluated Nixon’s performance more favorably than people who watched them on TV, an indication that visual

images could have impacts different from the words with which they were associated.⁹⁰ No debates were held in 1964, 1968, or 1972, but they have been held in every election since then. Although the format and arrangements usually are matters of some controversy, debates now appear to be an institutionalized part of presidential campaigns.

Studies show that performance in the debates has the potential to sway the undecided voter. For example, in 1984 President Reagan appeared tired and confused in his first debate with Walter Mondale. His unexpectedly poor performance raised the issue of his age (then 73) and resulted in a slight drop in the polls. Knowing how important the next encounter was, Reagan came in alert, prepared, and full of good humor. He dispelled the concerns raised in the first debate and gained 4 points in the polls.⁹¹

As in campaign coverage generally, the first question the media raise about debates is “Who won?” In many cases this can lead to exaggerated claims about the importance of small details, as the media focus on personality, strategy, and sound bites again comes into play. Pundits criticized John McCain’s debate performances in 2008 in part because he avoided making eye contact with Obama and on one occasion referred to him as “that one.” Such considerations may take up airtime on talk shows but likely mean no more to voters than other “horse-race” or personality-based coverage.

Media Coverage of Government

Media coverage of government exhibits problems and biases analogous to those evident in media coverage of campaigns. From the standpoint of the mass media, much of the routine work of government is dull—hence the media focus on what they consider more exciting.

Emphasis on the President (and Other Personalities)

The president is a single individual with personality and character. Naturally, then, he (and, one day, she) is inherently more interesting than a collectivity such as Congress or an abstraction such as the bureaucracy. The president receives the lion’s share of the evening news coverage.⁹² And not only does Congress play second fiddle in terms of media coverage, but coverage of Congress has declined in recent decades.⁹³ The problem, of course, is that the president is only one part of the government, and one with fairly limited powers (see Chapter 13). Thus, the media prime citizens to focus on presidents to a degree that is out of proportion to their real powers and responsibilities.

The exception to this generalization is one that proves the rule. For six months after the 1994 elections, the media virtually forgot about President Clinton as pack journalists turned their attention to Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich and the new Republican majority in Congress. For once, the media could represent Congress via a single personality. Now that the Democratic and Republican leaderships in Congress lack such colorful personalities, the media’s former neglect of the institution has returned.

This focus of the media on personalities seems to be a universal tendency. It is similar to building military coverage around sympathetic war heroes or building sports coverage around a few outstanding superstars. An effective governmental team, similar to a winning sports team or a successful military unit, requires teamwork—but the media find individual heroics and failures to be more compelling stories. Unfortunately, in framing coverage in terms of individuals, the media probably discourage political entrepreneurs from building coalitions—and instead encourage them to promote themselves, to grandstand, to “hog the ball.” Moreover, such media coverage primes citizens to think about

9.7

Assess media coverage of the government.

government in terms of the heroic exploits and tragic failures of individuals rather than in terms of institutions and processes that are operating effectively or poorly.⁹⁴

Emphasis on Conflict

Every time politicians make a controversial comment, they are assured of media coverage. Indeed, politicians who make the kind of inflammatory remarks the media love, and offer them up in convenient sound bites, can expect constant media attention. When issues are discussed in detail in a civil manner, the media can lose interest. In early 2010, for example, President Obama met with over three dozen lawmakers from both parties at a televised seven-hour summit on the healthcare bill then under consideration. The media largely did not know what to make of this mostly civil discussion; cable channels cut away after a few hours. One newspaper summed up the mood: “watching American politicians argue about health care can be seriously damaging to your health. Symptoms include migraines, extreme fatigue, and sudden violent urges.”⁹⁵

Ironically, the journalistic preference for conflict can discourage politicians from doing anything really interesting. When reporters learn of an innovative proposal, the necessity to portray conflict leads them to search out the idea’s likely enemies and trumpet their hostile reaction. As a result, journalists “often lead the chorus of criticism of anyone who tries to upset the apple cart. In so doing, they implicitly side with the interest groups and old-line politicians whose prerogatives are being challenged.” The clamor of opposition not only immediately threatens public perception of the proposal, but also threatens the person who floated it. The would-be reformer is likely to be portrayed “as naïve and politically unsophisticated” for taking the chance.⁹⁶

Journalists especially like conflict when it revolves around some kind of scandal. The same study that found coverage of Congress to be declining also found that the focus of coverage had changed. Policy stories outnumbered scandal stories by 13 to 1 from 1972 to the mid-1980s, but since then the ratio has plunged to 3 to 1.⁹⁷ The Clinton administration faced repeated scandals, some sexual and some financial—culminating in incessant reports of Clinton’s intimate relationship with White House intern Monica Lewinsky. George W. Bush faced a number of controversies that approached scandal-like proportions, including charges that his administration falsely manufactured reasons for going to war in Iraq and that his political advisers leaked the name of a CIA operative because her husband had criticized the war effort.⁹⁸ Given the media’s obsession with scandal and conflict, it is no wonder that politicians often try to tell journalists as little as possible. As one former White House spokesman put it, “It’s not easy getting up here and saying nothing. It takes a lot of preparation.”⁹⁹

Emphasis on the Negative

Media on the lookout for conflicts, scandals, and mistakes naturally emphasize the negative. What government does well is less newsworthy than what government does badly. Quiet compromises that improve public policies are less newsworthy than noisy arguments that accomplish nothing. Thus, according to one study, television coverage of Congress has become increasingly negative since 1972.¹⁰⁰ Newspapers also cover Congress less, and more negatively, than the presidency.¹⁰¹ Has Congress become that much worse, or has the change been inside the media? Even entertainment shows now portray government officials more negatively than they did a generation ago.¹⁰²

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Should Freedom of the Press Be Limited to Protect National Security?

The Issue

Even though the First Amendment guarantees “freedom of the press,” are there limits on what the media should be able to print or broadcast if a story might compromise American national security?

Background

The First Amendment to the Constitution clearly states that “Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press. . . .” On its face, this seems to be a straightforward declaration. As one Supreme Court justice was fond of saying, “No law means no law.” In practice, however, there is a long tradition in which courts, legislatures, and academic commentators try to carve out exceptions and qualifications to this general principle. Consult a typical textbook on constitutional law, and you will find literally hundreds of pages attempting to explain all the details and complexities of the law concerning freedom of speech and freedom of the press.¹

One particular area of controversy concerns the duties and responsibilities of the press when it covers issues directly connected to American national security. As almost everybody concedes, secrecy is a useful, often essential attribute of decision making in foreign policy, particularly in a time of war. But, if citizens are to pass judgment on the government’s performance in conducting foreign policy and prevent the abuse of governmental powers, the public must be kept informed about their country’s international actions and policies. There is, in short, an unavoidable tension between secrecy and accountability when democracies conduct foreign policy, a tension that surfaces in a variety of ways.

Censorship in the Interests of National Security

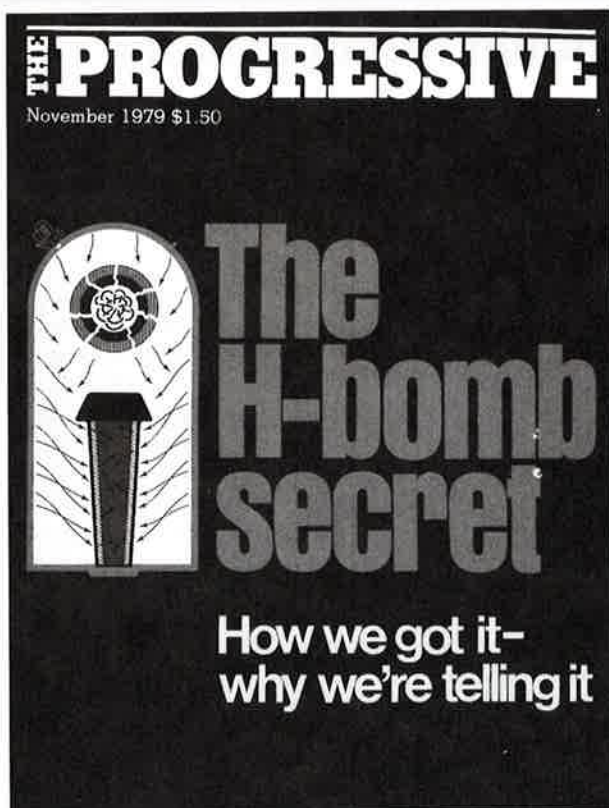
Suppose that the federal government knows in advance that a newspaper will print a story that top officials in the executive branch believe will be harmful to U.S. national security. Should they be able to prevent the paper from printing the story? Should the federal government, in other words, be allowed to censor the American news media in the interests of national security?

The kind of case just described is, we should make clear, exceptional. Although top federal officials are often annoyed or outraged by what the media choose to print or broadcast, very rarely have they resorted to what is called *prior restraint*. But it has happened.

The most celebrated case of this kind was the publishing of the Pentagon Papers. In 1968, then-Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara commissioned the writing of a detailed, secret history of how the United States had become involved in the Vietnam War. In 1971, a former Defense Department employee named Daniel Ellsberg leaked a copy of this still-classified history to several newspapers. In mid-June, the *New York Times* and then the *Washington Post* began publishing portions of that history, now generally known as the Pentagon Papers. Top officials in the Nixon administration—Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, in particular—believed that this publication could “result in great harm to the nation,” including “the death of soldiers, the destruction of alliances, the greatly increased difficulty of negotiation with our enemies, [and] the inability of our diplomats to negotiate.” Hence, they sought an injunction to prevent these newspapers from publishing any more of the Pentagon Papers. Several courts did issue a temporary injunction, which prevented the newspapers from publishing further material from the history as the case was being decided. (All newspapers complied with the court orders.)

In a 6 to 3 decision, however, the U.S. Supreme Court rejected the government’s claim and allowed the publication to continue. A majority of the justices did not contend that prior restraint could never be justified, but the Court did say that “any system of prior restraints . . . comes to this Court bearing a heavy presumption against its constitutional validity,” and that the government therefore had a “heavy burden of showing justification for such a restraint.” And the Nixon administration, in the Court’s view, did not meet that burden.²

A closer call, for many commentators, occurred in 1979, when a left-wing magazine called *The Progressive* decided to print an article that explained how to build a hydrogen bomb. Saying that the article only synthesized information from publicly available documents, the author and the publisher claimed that the article would benefit the nation “by demonstrating that open debate [about nuclear weaponry] was preferable to an oppressive and ineffective system of secrecy and classification.” The federal government replied that information in the article would present an “immediate, direct, and irreparable harm” to the interests of the United States, and it submitted affidavits from various cabinet members claiming that publication of the article would increase the risk of thermonuclear proliferation. In this case, a district court ruled in favor of the government, although the case was ultimately abandoned when a lengthy letter detailing the same information was published in two newspapers.³



Should the media be allowed to publish stories disclosing information that may endanger the country?

Self-Policing by the Media

The cases just described are, as we have already noted, clearly exceptional. In the more typical case, the government does not find out about the story in advance—or if it does, it simply tries to persuade the news agency not to print or broadcast it. In other words, the decision about what might harm the nation's security, and whether that harm justifies suppressing the story, is left to the media.

An interesting case of this kind occurred in late June 2006, when the *New York Times* published a front-page story about a secret program, begun shortly after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, in which counterterrorism officials had gained access to "financial records from a vast international database and examined banking transactions involving thousands of Americans and others in the United States." As the article noted, the Bush administration viewed the program as a "vital tool" in the war against terrorism, saying that it had played "a hidden role in domestic and foreign terrorism investigations . . . and helped in the capture of the most wanted [Al] Qaeda figure in Southeast Asia."

Indeed, after finding out about the investigation, administration officials made extensive efforts to persuade the paper not to publish the article, saying that "disclosure of the . . . program

could jeopardize its effectiveness." But the *Times* refused to halt publication. As Bill Keller, the newspaper's executive editor, summed up his conclusion, "We remain convinced that the administration's extraordinary access to this vast repository of international financial data, however carefully targeted use of it may be, is a matter of public interest."⁴

Over the next few days, there were numerous calls for an investigation of how the *New York Times* got the story and prosecution of the executive branch officials who had leaked it to the press, but no one in the administration seriously urged that the *Times* or its reporters be punished.

Protecting Confidential Sources

Many of the stories just described—and many non-foreign-policy stories as well—are obtained from reporters by so-called "confidential sources": sources who ask the reporter not to disclose their identity. This is a common practice among American reporters, and although it often annoys top decision makers (when they themselves are not the anonymous source), in most cases it does not present any particular legal dilemmas.

But suppose that the confidential source is breaking the law—as was almost certainly the case in both the Pentagon Papers and the more recent *New York Times* story. In order to prosecute the law-breaker, authorities need to find out who leaked the story—and the only way to do that, in most cases, is to ask the reporter. Should the reporter be compelled to disclose his or her sources to the police or prosecutors? Or does the First Amendment protect the reporter from such questioning?

The seminal Supreme Court case on this subject is *Branzburg v. Hayes*, decided in 1972. Branzburg was a reporter who wrote an article about a variety of illegal drug activities he had witnessed. Shortly thereafter, a prosecutor asked him to appear before a grand jury and identify the drug users. Branzburg refused—and was imprisoned as a result. His attorneys argued that the use of confidential sources was often essential to news gathering, and that if reporters were required to reveal their sources, they would be "measurably deterred from furnishing publishable information, all to the detriment of the free flow of information protected by the First Amendment." But the Court ruled against Branzburg: Reporters, similar to all other citizens, are not exempt from grand jury subpoenas.⁵

The Branzburg case, it is worth adding, only establishes that reporters do not enjoy a constitutional right to keep their sources secret. Partly in reaction to the Branzburg decision, more than half of the states have passed "shield" laws that provide at least a qualified privilege of confidentiality.⁶

How Have the Courts Ruled?

We should note here that the courts were a major player in almost all of the cases described above. This should come as no surprise. Whether one takes a broad or narrow view of freedom of the press, it is clear that the Constitution does pose a substantial hurdle to any legal attempts to command or regulate the press.

No matter how much legislatures or executives may resent it, the final say in most such cases will inevitably be pronounced by the courts.

What Do You Think?

1. Which should be a greater concern for contemporary Americans—the threat from terrorism or the threat from secret government programs that investigate or monitor the activities of ordinary citizens?
2. Of the three court cases described in this section, in which case(s)—if any—do you agree with the final decision? On the whole, do you feel that the courts have done a good or poor job of balancing freedom of the press against the needs of national security?
3. If you were a state legislator, would you vote for a shield law that provided full or partial immunity to reporters from having to reveal their confidential sources?
4. Did the *New York Times* make the right decision in publishing its story on the administration's use of financial data to track the activities of terrorists?

On the Web

For ongoing commentary about these and other issues in journalism ethics, see the following websites:

The Poynter Institute is a journalism school noted for its research about and discussion of ethical issues.

www.poynter.org

The *Columbia Journalism Review* is probably the best-known journal on media issues, although with a generally left-wing perspective.

www.cjrdaily.org

The Media Research Center monitors media coverage, from a conservative perspective.

www.mediaresearch.org

¹See, for example, Kathleen M. Sullivan and Gerald Gunther, *Constitutional Law*, 14th ed. (New York: Foundation Press, 2001), 956–1433.

²All quotations are taken from *New York Times Co. v. United States* 403 US 713 (1971).

³All quotations are taken from *United States v. Progressive, Inc.* 467 F. Supp. 990 (W.D. Wis. 1979).

⁴The original article, which also discusses the decision to publish, is Eric Lichtblau and James Risen, "Bank Data Sifted in Secret by U.S. to Block Terrorism," *New York Times*, June 23, 2006: A1.

⁵*Branzburg v. Hayes* 408 U.S. 665 (1972).

⁶Sullivan and Gunther, *Constitutional Law*, p. 1410.

Continued from page 268

The Response: Exaggerated Concern with the Media

Because the media have become the principal link between citizens and their government, elected officials often lose sight of the people. American politicians have long known about the political importance of the press: Witness the efforts of the early parties to establish their own newspapers. As the media became more independent and nonpartisan, politicians gradually came to understand that special efforts were needed to cultivate favorable coverage. At the presidential level, Theodore Roosevelt was perhaps the first president to have an aggressive press strategy of this type. Nearly all of his successors added new weapons to the presidential arsenal or institutionalized older ones. National security concerns complicated the relationship between politicians and the press (see the *Election Voices*). By the 1980s, media strategy had become a constant, almost obsessive concern of U.S. politicians, particularly those in Washington. Three weeks before the 1980 election, then-vice president Walter Mondale actually said, "If I had to give up . . . the opportunity to get on the evening news or the veto power, . . . I'd throw away the veto power."¹⁰³ The importance of swift and conscientious attention to the media has only increased since then. Historian Michael Bechloss put it this way: "When the Berlin Wall went up in 1961, President Kennedy was on vacation. For six days, no one pressed him hard for a reaction. If that happened now, President Obama would have three seconds."¹⁰⁴

CHAPTER SUMMARY

9.1 Trace the development of the mass media from colonial times to the present day.

The mass media have been important players in American politics almost from the beginning, setting the context for elections by informing voters about politics and policy. Their character has changed, however, from partisan allies of political elites in the early 1800s to the more fragmented and diverse outlets of today.

9.2 Identify the primary media through which Americans get their news.

Initially small-scale and elitist, the media have grown progressively more accessible to the average citizen. By most measures, television is now the most important form of mass communication—but recent technological developments have produced new media, such as cable and satellite TV and the Internet, that are weakening the traditional print and broadcast systems.

9.3 Characterize the effects the media have on the public's political attitudes.

Media effects on public opinion fall into several categories. Agenda setting occurs when media coverage affects what issues or problems people think about. Priming occurs when the media encourage people to evaluate political figures in terms of one set of considerations rather than another. Framing occurs when the media present problems or issues in such a way that people are stimulated to think about them in terms of one frame of reference rather than another. The media also may change attitudes more slowly through their role in political socialization.

9.4 Outline the major kinds of media bias and assess criticisms of the media.

Frequently, critics charge the media with one or another form of bias. Surveys show that reporters and editors are

more liberal and more supportive of Democrats than is the public at large, but it is less clear whether the values and opinions of journalists have a significant effect on their political coverage. Moreover, other critics charge that professional and economic considerations lead the media in a conservative direction.

9.5 Illustrate the influence of entertainment media on American political attitudes.

More important than ideological biases are biases that arise from the definition of what is news, and especially what is considered good TV news. The media reflect an emphasis on the negative and an emphasis on conflict. They focus on dramatic incidents and colorful personalities rather than on more abstract forces and developments, even where the latter are far more important. Thus, “soft news” often crowds out “hard news.”

9.6 Assess media coverage of the election process.

The media oversimplify complex situations and reduce complicated arguments and positions to ten-second sound bites. Campaign coverage focuses on competition rather than on detailed policy positions and arguments. Such biases are understandable in terms of media outlets' constant competition to reach a broader audience.

9.7 Assess media coverage of the government.

Unlike the media in many other countries, the U.S. media are organized and operated from the private sector. This has its benefits—the government cannot easily control the messages the media send to members of the public. But there are also costs. The role of the mass media in serving the public interest exists in constant tension with their role as profit-making enterprises serving their stockholders.

myPolisciLab EXERCISES

Apply what you learned in this chapter on MyPoliSciLab.

 **Read** on mypoliscilab.com

eText: Chapter 9

 **Study** and **Review** on mypoliscilab.com

Pre-Test

Post-Test

Chapter Exam

Flashcards

 **Watch** on mypoliscilab.com

Video: YouTube Politics

Video: The Pentagon's Media Message

 **Explore** on mypoliscilab.com

Simulation: You Are the News Editor

Comparative: Comparing News Media

Timeline: Three Hundred Years of American Mass Media

Visual Literacy: Use of the Media by the American Public

KEY TERMS

agenda setting, p. 256

CNN effect, p. 256

equal-time rule, p. 248

fairness doctrine, p. 248

framing, p. 257

mass media, p. 245

new media, p. 252

priming, p. 257

selection principle, p. 258

sound bite, p. 265

SUGGESTED READINGS

Of General Interest

Farnsworth, Stephen J., and S. Robert Lichter. *The Nightly News Nightmare*, 3rd ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010. Excellent summary of how television covered presidential campaigns between 1988 and 2008, with particularly good data on media content.

Lippmann, Walter. *Public Opinion*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1991. Originally published in 1922, it is still the best book ever written about the mass media.

Neumann, W. Russell. *The Future of the Mass Audience*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1991. Thoughtful examination of the effects of technological change on mass communications. Concludes that new media will not fragment the audience as much as many think.

Norris, Pippa. *A Virtuous Circle*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2000. Hugely informative survey of politics and media in advanced industrial democracies. In general, Norris takes a more sanguine view of modern developments than many critics do.

Panagopoulos, Costas, ed. *Politicking Online: The Transformation of Election Campaign Communications*. Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009. A set of essays dissecting the impact of the Internet on modern campaigns.

Focused Studies

Hewitt, Hugh. *Blog: Understanding the Information Reformation That's Changing Your World*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005. Provocative argument about the importance of blogs, written by the author of one of the most important conservative blogs.

Iyengar, Shanto, and Donald Kinder. *News That Matters*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987. An exemplary experimental study that demonstrates the existence of agenda setting and priming.

Lavrakas, Paul, and Michael Traugott, eds. *Election Polls, the News Media, and Democracy*. New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2000. Comprehensive collection of essays on election polls. Suggests that the media make a significant contribution to American democracy through election polls, when properly done.

West, Darrell. *Air Wars*, 5th ed. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, 2009. Readable study of the evolution and consequences of television advertising in campaigns since 1952.

ON THE WEB

Virtually every news organization these days has a website.

abcnews.go.com/politics

www.cnn.com/POLITICS

www.nytimes.com/pages/politics

www.latimes.com/news/politics

www.foxnews.com/politics

www.washingtonpost.com

This list consists of some of the most prominent news organizations' politics websites. In addition to these news sites, commentary has become extremely important, particularly with respect to framing and priming issues. The editorial sections of these websites are also good sources for learning about elite debate and dialogue.

www.tnr.com

www.theweeklystandard.com

Magazines such as the left-of-center *The New Republic* and the conservative *The Weekly Standard* have become important outlets for policy ideas.

www.people-press.org

The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press conducts survey research on how the media conduct themselves. Its website is invaluable for understanding how the public reacts to the media.