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

President Ronald Reagan addressed Congress during prime time on February 18, 1981, to outline his proposed policies for economic recovery. Reagan’s speech was covered live on CBS, NBC, and ABC and garnered a Nielsen rating of 60, meaning that three-fifths of the American
public watched it. Beyond reaching this enormous live audience, Reagan knew he could communicate his message to the many people who would soon read and view news about his remarks. The next day, at least 55 percent of the public—the percentage that said they read a newspaper every day in surveys at that time—could be expected to pick up a newspaper containing stories about the president’s speech. Roughly 38 percent could be expected to view some coverage of the president’s speech on the highly rated national newscasts at dinnertime.

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

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

THE MASS MEDIA TODAY

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

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

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

Whether one is promoting a candidate, drawing attention to a social issue, or proposing a government program, political success depends on effectively communicating a message. The key is gaining control over the political agenda, which today, as throughout the period of high-tech politics, involves getting one’s priorities presented at the top of the daily news.
Politicians have learned that one way to guide the media’s focus successfully is to give the media carefully staged events to report on. A recent study of TV news coverage of the last four weeks of a presidential campaign found that 80 percent of the stories involved tightly scripted appearances by the candidates. Such media events are staged primarily for the purpose of being covered; if the media were not there, the event would probably not happen or would have little significance. Getting the right image on the TV news for just 30 seconds can have a much greater payoff than a whole day’s worth of handshaking. Whereas once a candidate’s G.O.T.V. program stood for “Get Out the Vote,” today it is more likely to mean “Get on TV.”

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

Media events and TV commercials are largely about image making. Such image making does not stop with the campaign; it is also a critical element in day-to-day governing. Politicians’ images in the press are seen as good indicators of their clout. Image is especially important for presidents, who in recent decades have devoted much attention to maintaining a well-honed public image. In today’s high-tech age, presidents can hardly lead the country if they cannot communicate effectively with it. President Bill Clinton once reflected on CNN that, “The thing that has surprised me most is how difficult it is … to really keep communicating what you’re about to the American people. That to me has been the most frustrating thing.” According to journalist Bob Woodward, Bill Clinton confided to a friend that “I did not realize the importance of communications and the overriding importance of what is on the evening television news. If I am not on, or there with a message, someone else is, with their message.”

The Development of Media Politics

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

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

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

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

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

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

In his analysis of media coverage of presidential campaigns since 1960, Thomas Patterson found that news coverage of presidential candidates has become increasingly less favorable. Patterson’s careful analysis uncovers two major aspects of this trend toward more negative coverage: The emphasis of campaign reporting has changed dramatically from “what” to “why,” and whereas the “what” was primarily candidates’ policy statements, today’s “why” focuses on the campaign as a horse race. An emphasis on hard-biting analysis of political maneuvering and campaign controversies naturally leads to unfavorable impressions of the candidates. Clearly, little favorable could come of coverage of such issues as Hillary’s Clinton’s use of a private email server as Secretary of State or Donald Trump’s tax returns. Those who run campaigns naturally complain about such coverage. As Karl Rove, one of George W. Bush’s top political advisers, said after the 2000 election,

The general nature of the tone of the coverage was very much in keeping with what Patterson suggests, that it is process oriented, highly cynical, negative, dismissive of issue positions, focused on the internals of the campaign and not on the big messages and really serves to trivialize the whole contest.
Whether or not such media coverage is ultimately in the public’s best interest is much debated. The press maintains that the public is now able to get a complete, accurate, and unvarnished look at the candidates. Critics of the media charge that it emphasizes the controversial aspects of a campaign at the expense of examining major issues.

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

The Print Media

The first American daily newspaper was printed in Philadelphia in 1783, but such papers did not proliferate until the technological advances of the mid-nineteenth century. The ratification of the First Amendment in 1791, guaranteeing freedom of speech, gave even the earliest American newspapers freedom to print whatever they saw fit. In so doing, it gave the media a unique ability to display the government’s dirty linen, an ability that, as we’ve seen, the American press today makes ample use of.

Thomas Jefferson famously said, “If I had to choose between government without newspapers, and newspapers without government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.” Our first mass medium, the newspaper, has continued to play a crucial role down through the centuries. Even in recent decades, with the emergence of other media, most political scientists who have researched media and politics agree on the value of newspapers as a source of information. Studies invariably find that regular newspaper readers are better informed and more likely to vote. For example, Robert Putnam, in his highly influential book titled *Bowling Alone*, finds that “those who read the news are more engaged and knowledgeable about the world than those who only watch the news.” Putnam concludes that “newspaper reading and good citizenship go together.” All of this should hardly be surprising given that newspapers have so much more information than TV. A major metropolitan newspaper averages roughly 100,000 words daily, whereas a typical broadcast of the nightly news on TV amounts to only about 3,600 words.
Despite the continued value of newspapers, ever since the rise of TV and TV news, American newspaper circulation rates have been declining. And with the rise of the Internet, this trend has been greatly accelerated. Whereas in 1960 one newspaper was sold for every two adults, by 2014 this ratio had plummeted to one paper for every six adults. In 2014, the General Social Survey found that just 2 percent of people under the age of 25 reported reading a newspaper every day, whereas 47 percent never read a newspaper at all. Among senior citizens, 44 percent said they read a newspaper daily and just 18 percent said they never read a newspaper. With such demographic patterns, newspaper circulations are likely to continue to drop for some time to come.

Many people believe the future of the newspaper business lies with the Internet. For most major newspapers, online editions have become a source of advertising revenue. However, this advertising revenue falls far short of what newspapers need to maintain a full staff of reporters and editors; as of 2014, revenue from online editions represented only about 17.6 percent of newspapers’ total take from advertising. Some newspapers have tried charging for access to their reporting. But this strategy of selling Internet subscriptions has thus far generated substantial revenues mostly for major papers like the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*. As Howard Kurtz writes, newspapers are facing the problem that “in a world of Twitter feeds and gigabytes of gossip and a thousand other distractions, most people will see no need to pay for news. There will always be enough aggregators out there for them to cherry-pick the latest headlines, photos and video.”

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

*The Emergence of Radio and Television*

Gradually, electronic media—beginning with radio and then television—have displaced the print media as Americans’ principal source of news and information. By the middle of the 1930s, radio ownership had become almost universal in America, and during World War II, radio went into the news business in earnest, taking the nation to the war in Europe and the Pacific. A decade later, the public was getting its news from television as well. Then, in 1960, John Kennedy faced off against Richard Nixon in the first-ever televised presidential debate. Haggard from a week in the hospital, and with his five-o’clock shadow and perspiration clearly visible, Nixon looked awful compared to the crisp, clean, attractive Kennedy. The poll results from this debate illustrate the visual power of television in American politics: people listening on the radio gave the edge to Nixon, but those who saw the debate on television thought Kennedy had won. Russell Baker, who covered the event for the *New York Times*, writes in his memoirs that “television replaced newspapers as the most important communications medium in American politics” that very night. Nixon blamed his poor appearance in this debate for his narrow defeat in the election.
Much as radio and World War II in the 1940s, television took Americans to the Vietnam War in the 1960s. Television exposed governmental naïveté—and sometimes outright lying—about the progress of the war. Every night, Americans watched the horrors of war in living color on television. President Johnson soon had two wars on his hands, one in faraway Vietnam and the other at home with antiwar protesters—both covered in detail by the media. In 1968, CBS anchor Walter Cronkite journeyed to Vietnam for a firsthand look at the state of the war. In an extraordinary TV special, Cronkite reported that the war was not being won nor was it likely to be. Watching from the White House, Johnson sadly remarked that if he had lost Cronkite, he had lost the support of the American people.19

Walter Cronkite on CBS, and his counterparts on ABC and NBC, highly trusted and influential, brought about and symbolized the golden era of network news. That era is clearly coming to an end, as cable news and the Internet have increasingly supplanted the nightly news shows. Today, these shows attract an audience of about 15 percent of the population every weeknight during the dinner hour, as compared to about 40 percent during their heyday in the period from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s. In this era of 24-hour cable news channels and the Internet, turning on the television to get the news at a set time early in the evening seems like a quaint remnant of the past to many Americans, especially young adults.

Government Regulation of Electronic Media

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

The FCC’s regulation takes several important forms. First, to prevent near monopolies of control over a broadcast market, the FCC has instituted rules to limit the number of stations owned or controlled by one company. Since a simplification in 1996, the rule has been just that no single owner can control more than 35 percent of the broadcast market. Second, the FCC conducts periodic examinations of the goals and performance of stations as part of its licensing authority. Congress long ago stipulated that in order to receive a broadcasting license, a station must serve the public interest. However, the FCC has rarely withdrawn licenses for failing to do so, as when a Chicago station lost its license for neglecting informational programs and for presenting obscene movies. Third, the FCC has issued a number of fair treatment rules concerning access to the airwaves for political candidates and officeholders. The equal time rule stipulates that if a station sells advertising time to one candidate, it must be willing to sell equal time to other candidates for the same office. In addition, if a channel allocates time to a candidate that isn’t part of a news show then the channel is required to give equal coverage to other candidates who request it. Thus, when Donald Trump got 12 minutes of air time when he hosted an episode of “Saturday Night Live” in November 2015, some other presidential candidates demanded equal time on NBC.

For many years, the fairness doctrine required broadcasters to give time to opposing views if they broadcast a program slanted to one side of a controversial issue. But with the development of so many TV channels via cable, by the late 1980s this rule was seen as unnecessary and was abolished. This change opened up the way for today’s highly partisan news shows, such as the conservative O’Reilly Factor on Fox News and the liberal Rachel Maddow Show on MSNBC.
From Broadcasting to Narrowcasting: The Rise of Cable and Cable News

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

Whether the public views content on traditional cable stations or via a streaming service, narrowcasting has significantly affected media usage patterns, especially for young adults. Having grown up with narrowcasting alternatives, young adults are less likely than other age groups to be using newspapers and broadcast media as news and information sources. Interestingly, one source of information about politics that young people are more likely than other age groups to rely on is humorous shows that cover current events, or “infotainment.” Scholars have found that by wrapping bits of political content into an amusing package, entertainment shows that cover current events can make politics more appealing to viewers who might otherwise ignore the subject, and thereby add to their political knowledge. Barry Hollander specifically examined what young adults take away from infotainment shows and concluded that they glean “at least modest amounts of campaign information from such content.”20 Matthew Baum found that exposure to entertainment-oriented TV talk shows among voters with lower-than-average political interest had a significant impact on how they evaluated the candidates.21

Ironically, it is the fact that infotainment shows are not designed to convey political information that makes it desirable for politicians to appear on them in person. As the old saying goes, “If you want to go duck hunting, you need to go where the ducks are.” People who are not much interested in politics can often only be reached by appearing on shows that don’t normally do politics.
selective exposure
The process through which people consciously choose to get the news from information sources that have viewpoints compatible with their own.

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

Like talk radio, cable TV news has become more and more ideologically charged in recent years. Sarah Sobieraj and Jeffrey Berry have recently studied the prevalence of “outrage” on such shows. They define “outrage discourse” as involving “efforts to provoke a visceral response from the audience, usually in the form of anger, fear, or moral righteousness through the use of overgeneralizations, sensationalism, misleading or patently inaccurate information, ad hominem attacks, and partial truths about opponents.” They estimate that such rhetoric is used on average once every 90 seconds on cable TV shows and even more frequently on talk radio. The most common mode of outrage according to their content analysis was mockery/sarcasm, followed by misrepresentative exaggeration, name calling, and insulting language.

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

Whether the evolution of narrowcasting and the segmentation of the news audience into opposing camps is good or bad for democracy is a matter of much debate. On the positive side, it can be said that the new, more ideologically tinged presentation of the news stimulates political involvement for many viewers. It also often helps to clarify what is at stake in policy decisions. On the negative side, the increasingly strident tone in the news has turned some people off from politics and contributed to a generalized decline in trust of the mass media. It has also made it harder for those who are politically involved to see the other side of political arguments and to be willing to compromise.
Two other common criticisms of cable news channels are that too much of the time they show people yelling at one another and that when a story breaks they tend to sensationalize it. President Obama once remarked that he doesn’t watch cable news channels because “it feels like WWF wrestling.” Softening this derogatory remark, Obama went on to say that “it’s not even necessarily that there’s not good reporting on it; it’s just that everyone is having to accelerate to get the next story, the new story, and if there’s a story that people think is going to sell, then they overdo it.”

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

### The Impact of the Internet

Some scholars have optimistically predicted that the Internet will be a boon for American democracy by enabling citizens to become well informed about politics. Indeed, as any college student knows, the Internet is the ultimate research tool. Want to know something specific? The answer can usually be found by searching the Internet using a few key words. If you want to know how presidential candidates stand on federal support for higher education, an Internet search should quickly reveal the answers. Or if you want to know how your two U.S. senators voted on appropriations for college loan funding, the records of the Senate roll calls can be found on the Internet. In short, for anyone with basic computing skills, gaining information about political issues is now easier than ever before. (However, as this chapter’s “You Are the Policymaker” debate makes clear, not all citizens have equal access to this information.)

**Figure 7.1** HOW THE AUDIENCES OF CABLE NEWS CHANNELS ARE POLARIZED BY POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

In 2014, the Pew Research Center classified survey respondents’ ideology depending on how they responded to 10 policy questions. As you can see from the graph below, conservatives and liberals differed widely in terms of which cable news channels they watched.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political Ideology</th>
<th>Fox</th>
<th>CNN</th>
<th>MSNBC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consistently liberal</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mostly liberal</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mostly conservative</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistently conservative</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** 2014 Pew Research Center Survey data.
When Americans go online, they have access to a massive number of news and opinion websites, which either produce original content or curate news stories from around the nation and across the globe, or both. As a result, Americans can listen to radio streaming from Afghanistan, to television sourced to the nation’s capital, to long- and short-form essays from every kind of newsfeed and magazine, and to reports from local newspapers that, increasingly, have abandoned print and are now exclusively digital. Through a wide range of social media outlets, Americans also are finding new ways to share views about politics. Twitter, Facebook, GovLoop, Tumblr, and many other services allow users endless opportunities to consume and communicate political content.

Not all Americans, however, benefit directly from this explosion in online media coverage and activity. Indeed, large and persistent differences exist between the kinds of people who inhabit the digital world and those excluded from it. The most striking, perhaps, involves age. In 2000, fully 70 percent of 18- to 29-year-old Americans accessed the Internet regularly, compared with just 14 percent of those 65 and older. Since then, the age gap has narrowed somewhat, but it remains wide. In 2015, virtually all young Americans (97 percent) were online. Among older Americans, just 60 percent were.

This “digital divide” applies to other groups as well. Online access varies dramatically according to people’s income, race, and educational attainment. Take a look at the figure below, which tracks the digital divide among Americans of different educational levels over time. In 2000, Americans with a bachelor’s degree or higher were four times as likely to go online as were Americans with a high school education or less. This gap, too, has narrowed with the passage of time; still, in 2015, the least educated Americans were upward of 30 percentage points less likely to go online than were the most highly educated.

Deeming Internet access a basic right in a well-functioning democracy, some people argue that the government should play an active role in reducing the digital divide. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is proposing one way to do so: providing a subsidy to help low-income families defray the costs of acquiring high-speed Internet. By adding Internet access to the portfolio of offerings under its Lifeline program, which currently enables the poor to gain access to land and mobile telephones, the FCC hopes to mitigate the many political and economic inequalities propagated by the digital divide.

Not everyone, however, is happy about the FCC’s initiative. Critics point to the high costs of financing an expanded Lifeline program. They also argue that there is no demonstrable proof that these
Yet the fact that so much political information is at one's fingertips via the Internet doesn't necessarily mean that people will take advantage of this unprecedented opportunity to become well informed about politics. To a far greater extent than TV, the Internet is purposive; that is, it allows people to see the product of their own intentional choices—and nothing else. Politics is only one of a myriad of subjects that one can find out about on the Internet. Most Americans’ interest in politics is fairly limited. People with limited political interest will probably not be motivated to use the Internet to look up detailed information about politics very often, let alone to follow politics on a regular basis. Indeed, in the most comprehensive study of the Internet and politics to date, Matthew Hindman finds that traffic to political sites accounts for just 0.12 percent of all Web traffic, with the most frequently visited political site—HuffingtonPost.com—ranking 796th in terms of viewing hits. 29

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

For campaigns, the ability to post information and communicate with supporters via the Internet appears to help somewhat with political mobilization. Bruce Bimber and Richard Davis’s study of campaigning online found that “campaign web sites attract supporters of the candidates who display them, and the messages of these sites have a modest tendency to strengthen and reinforce voters’ predispositions.”30 As these authors point out, with the decline of traditional neighborhood-based party organizations, the Internet is providing a much-needed means to bring activists together, employing such vehicles as Meetup and WhatsApp.

Blogs in particular have provided political activists with a means to make their concerns heard to an extent that was previously possible only for professional journalists. Indeed, Brian Williams of MSNBC remarks that because of blogs, the news media now faces competition from “people who have an opinion, a modem, and a bathrobe.” He further laments, “All of my life, developing credentials to cover my field of work, and now I’m up against a guy named Vinny in an efficiency apartment in the Bronx who hasn’t left the efficiency apartment in two years.”31 His lament appears to be somewhat exaggerated, however. In theory, anyone can challenge Brian Williams in the blogosphere, but in practice few bloggers are ever going to be able to reach as many people as a major journalist. Posting a blog entry is easy, but getting it national attention is difficult. Matthew Hindman analyzed the most successful political bloggers and found that in their credentials they are far more similar to the leading traditional journalists than to Brian Williams’ “Vinny.” In particular, the major political bloggers like Markos Moulitsas Zuniga, founder of the Daily Kos, and Hugh Hewitt all have strong analytic training, excellent writing skills, and an encyclopedic knowledge of politics. Hindman concludes that, in fact,
Blogs are playing an increasingly important role in the reporting of political news. In 2005, 23-year-old Garrett Graff, who was writing a blog about the news media in Washington, became the first person to receive a White House press pass for the specific purpose of writing a blog. Here, bloggers cover a candidate speech during the 2012 presidential primary campaign.

blogs have “given a small group of educational, professional, and technical elites new influence in U.S. politics” but “have done far less to amplify the political voice of average citizens.”

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

Private Control of the Media

As we have seen, America has a rich diversity of media sources. One of the main reasons that this has long been the case is that journalism has long been big business in the United States, with control of virtually all media outlets in private hands. Only a relatively small number of TV stations are publicly owned in America, and these PBS stations play a minimal role in the news business, attracting very low ratings. In contrast, in many other countries major TV networks are owned by the government. In Canada, for example, the most prominent stations are part of the state-run network (the Canadian Broadcasting Company); this is the case in most European countries as well.

Because of private ownership of the media and the First Amendment right to free speech, American journalists have long had an unfettered capacity to criticize government leaders and policies. In established democracies where major networks are government-owned, government ownership is not supposed to inhibit journalists from criticizing the government, because the journalists are assured autonomy. However, in some countries, like China, that do not have democratic systems, the media—newspapers as well as television—are typically government enterprises and have to carefully avoid any criticism of the government. In countries where freedom of the press is restricted, journalists may work in fear of physical threats, imprisonment, and even being murdered. Their offices can be searched at any time or their work confiscated, and their stories must be cleared by government censors.
Although the American media are independent when it comes to journalistic content, they are totally dependent on advertising revenues to keep their businesses going. Public ownership means that the media can serve the public interest without worrying about the size of their audience; private ownership means that getting the biggest possible audience is the primary—indeed, sometimes the only—objective. This focus on audience is exacerbated by the fact that media in America today tend to be part of large conglomerates. Consider, for example, the major television networks. The Disney Corporation bought ABC, General Electric acquired NBC, Viacom (a conglomerate that owns many entertainment companies, including Paramount Pictures, MTV, and BET) took over CBS, and CNN became part of Time Warner. In the newspaper business, chains, such as Gannett, Knight-Ridder, and Newhouse, control newspapers that together represent over 80 percent of the nation’s daily circulation.

The increasing focus on profit has had repercussions for American journalism and, specifically, political reporting. For example, the major television networks once had bureaus all over the world; however, these foreign bureaus became a target for cost cutting, as they were expensive to operate and surveys usually show that the public is not much interested in news from overseas. Similarly, foreign coverage in newspapers has been dropped off precipitously as newspapers have to cut their costs in light of declining revenues. Priya Kumar’s study of a set of major newspapers found that the total number of foreign news stories in these newspapers declined by over 50 percent between 1985 and 2010. As we shall see in the following section, striving for profits greatly shapes how the news is reported in America.

WHY IT MATTERS TODAY

Media as a Business

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

REPORTING THE NEWS

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

As journalism students will quickly tell you, news is what is timely and different. It is a man biting a dog, not a dog biting a man. In his 1987 bestselling book Donald Trump wrote that “One thing I’ve learned about the press is they’re always hungry for a good story, and the more sensational, the better. It’s in the nature of the job, and I understand that. The point is that if you are a little different, or a little outrageous, or if you do things that are bold or controversial, the press is going to write about you.” As a 2016 presidential candidate, Trump followed this strategy for obtaining media attention to the letter. By calling Mexico an exporter of criminals and rapists in his first campaign speech, Trump made big news. Most candidates would not risk alienating a whole voting bloc, such as Hispanics, but Trump decided that the benefits of generating so much media attention were worth this cost. Once the media’s fascination with this statement wore off, he followed up with other attention-grabbing proposals, such as building a huge wall with Mexico and deporting all 11 million undocumented residents. And when the political agenda quickly turned to the threat of terrorism, Trump

chains
Groups of newspapers published by media conglomerates and today accounting for over four-fifths of the nation’s daily newspaper circulation.
pivoted to making provocative statements about Muslims, including an outright ban on Muslims entering the United States.

Over and over again, the result of Trump’s strategy was that his statements became the primary focus of news coverage of the presidential race. As we discuss in this chapter, the financial incentives of the media to get people to follow their stories often drive what they decide to cover; the media simply could not resist the red meat that Trump regularly fed them. At one point during the 2016 presidential campaign, political analyst Nate Silver reported that Trump was the subject of 46 percent of Google News hits regarding the Republican nomination, a truly extraordinary situation considering that there were 16 other Republican candidates in the race for president.

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

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

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

### Finding the News

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

Politicians depend on the media to spread certain information and ideas to the general public. Sometimes they feed stories to reporters in the form of trial balloons, information leaked to see what the political reaction will be. For example, a few days prior to President Bill Clinton’s admission that he had had an “inappropriate relationship” with Monica Lewinsky, top aides to the president leaked the story to Richard Berke of the *New York Times*. The timing of the leak was obvious; the story appeared just before Clinton had to decide how to testify before a grand jury. When the public’s reaction was that it was about time he admitted this relationship, it was probably easier for him to do so—at least politically.

Journalists and politicians have a symbiotic relationship, with politicians relying on journalists to get their message out and journalists relying on politicians to keep them in the know. When reporters feel that their access to information is being impeded, complaints of censorship become widespread. During the Gulf War in 1991, reporters’ freedom of movement and observation was severely restricted. After the fighting was over, 15 influential news organizations sent a letter to the secretary
of defense complaining that the rules for reporting the war were designed more to control the news than to facilitate it.\textsuperscript{39} Largely because of such complaints, during the 2003 military campaign to oust Saddam Hussein the Pentagon “embedded” about 500 reporters with coalition fighting forces, thus enabling them to report on combat activity as it happened. The result was an increased ability to transmit combat footage. A content analysis by Farnsworth and Lichter found that 35 percent of major TV network stories contained combat scenes compared to just 20 percent in 1991.\textsuperscript{40} The public response to this new form of war reporting was largely positive.\textsuperscript{41}

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

There are many cases of good investigative reporting making an important impact on the conduct of government as well as business. For example, in 1999, the \textit{Chicago Tribune} documented the experiences of numerous Illinois men sentenced to death who had been convicted on questionable evidence or coerced into confessing. Soon after the series was published, the governor of Illinois suspended executions in the state. In 2007, a reporter with the \textit{Birmingham News} won a Pulitzer Prize for his exposure of cronyism and corruption in Alabama’s two-year college system, resulting in the dismissal of the chancellor and other corrective action. And in 2015 a \textit{New York Times} reporter won a Pulitzer for his reports on how some lobbyists had swayed state attorneys general, slanting justice toward the wealthy and connected.

\textbf{Presenting the News}

Once the news has been “found,” it has to be neatly compressed into a 30-second news segment or fit in among other stories and advertisements in a newspaper. If you had to pick a single word to describe news coverage by the news media, it would be \textit{superficial}. “The name of the game,” says former White House Press Secretary Jody Powell, “is skimming off the cream, seizing on the most interesting, controversial, and unusual aspects of an issue.”\textsuperscript{42} Editors do not want to bore or confuse their audience. TV news, in particular, is little more than a headline service. According to former CBS anchor Dan Rather, “You simply cannot be a well-informed citizen by just watching the news on television.”\textsuperscript{43}

Analysis of news events rarely lasts more than a minute on network or cable news shows. Patterson’s study of campaign coverage found that only skimpy attention was given to the issues during a presidential campaign. Clearly, if coverage of political events during the height of an election campaign is thin, coverage of day-to-day policy questions is even thinner. Issues such as reforming the Medicare system, adjusting eligibility levels for food stamps, and regulating the financial services industry are highly complex and difficult to treat in a short news clip. A careful study of media coverage of Bill and Hillary Clinton’s comprehensive health care proposal in 1993–1994 found that the media focused much more on strategy and who was winning the political game than on the specific policy issues involved.\textsuperscript{44} President Obama faced exactly the same problem in his battle to reform America’s health care system in 2009–2010, frequently admonishing the press, “This isn’t about me. This isn’t about politics.”

Ironically, as technology has enabled the media to pass along information with greater speed, news coverage has become less thorough.\textsuperscript{45} As veteran reporter George Skelton writes, “Until recent years, newspaper reporters could spend the day digging into substance before sitting down to write. These days they’re pressed into blogging and updating, leaving less time for unearthing facts. The public may get the news faster, but in less depth.”\textsuperscript{46} Newspapers once routinely reprinted the entire text of important political speeches. Now that speech transcripts can be found via Google,
newspapers rarely print them, and only the most interested people search for them. In place of speeches, Americans now usually hear **sound bites** of about 10 seconds on TV. The average length of time that a presidential candidate was given to talk uninterrupted on the TV news has declined precipitously from 43 seconds in 1968 to just 9 seconds in 2008.47 Sound bites are not that much longer in other established democracies. One might think that in European countries with public ownership of the networks, as in Britain with the BBC, major politicians would be given longer to make their case than in the strictly commercial-driven media in the United States. However, as you can see in Figure 7.2, the sound bites for politicians in Germany, France, and Great Britain are not that much longer than those for American politicians.

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

> it’s a strange thing that you can go through your campaign for president, and you have a basic theme that you express in a 15- or 20-minute standard speech … but the traveling press—sometimes exceeding 100 people—will never report that speech to the public. The peripheral aspects become the headlines, but the basic essence of what you stand for and what you hope to accomplish is never reported.48

Sound-bite journalism has meant that politicians often feel that there is little point in discussing policies in any detail. Why should politicians work to build a carefully crafted case for their point of view when a catchy line will do just as well? And as veteran news anchor Walter Cronkite wrote, “Naturally, nothing of any significance is going to be said in seven seconds, but this seems to work to the advantage of many politicians. They are not required to say anything of significance, and issues can be avoided rather than confronted.”49

Indeed, a series of studies of TV news reporting of presidential elections over the last two decades has found the coverage wanting in both quantity and quality. Farnsworth and Lichter’s content analysis of the 1988 to 2008 campaigns concludes that “the networks consistently focused on the horse race, shortchanged matters of substance, and accentuated the most negative aspects of the campaign trail, and in so doing failed to provide an accurate and fair reflection of the presidential campaigns.”50
Notably, Farnsworth and Lichter absolve the candidates from any blame for this state of affairs. Their careful analysis of what candidates present in their speeches, campaign ads, and Web sites finds plenty of in-depth discussion of policy issues; the problem they point to is that the media all too frequently fail to pass this on to the public, or at best present only small morsels of what the candidates are trying to get across.

WHY IT MATTERS TODAY

The Increasing Speed of News Dissemination

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

The problem of getting the networks to cover serious issues in-depth scarcely goes away once a president assumes office. During the Cold War, presidents could routinely obtain coverage for their speeches on the three major networks anytime they requested it. Now, with the networks able to shunt the coverage to cable news outlets, it is easy for them to say “no” to even the president. For example, in September 2009, Fox opted to show an episode of So You Think You Can Dance instead of Obama’s address to Congress about health care. When he was press secretary to President Obama, Jay Carney revealed that the president would have liked to have given more prime-time addresses, but feared that the networks would deny his requests. Carney further revealed the White House “did a little research, and there was a pretty good case to be made that the reluctance to give [air]time has increased over the years.”

Bias in the News

Some have argued that political reporting is biased in favor of one point of view—most often that the media have a liberal bias. There is limited evidence to support this charge of a liberal bias. In four comprehensive surveys of American journalists conducted between 1971 and 2002, David Weaver and his colleagues consistently found that reporters

The clearest and most consistent bias in the news is the focus on sensational stories. When former Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert (R-IL) was indicted for falsifying financial transactions in an attempt to evade scrutiny for past crimes alleging sexual abuse, the media focused a bright light on this story, as evidenced by the crowd of cameras and reporters around him in this photo of Hastert entering the federal courthouse in Chicago.
were more likely to classify themselves as liberal than the general public. For example, in 2002, 40 percent of journalists surveyed said they leaned to the left compared to only 25 percent who leaned to the right, roughly the reverse of what surveys found for the American public. However, the vast majority of studies have found that most reporting is not systematically biased toward a particular ideology or party.

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

The overriding bias, however, is not an ideological bias but, rather, as we have seen, a bias toward stories that will draw the largest audience. Bernard Goldberg also writes, “In the United States of Entertainment there is no greater sin than to bore the audience. A TV reporter could get it wrong from time to time. He could be snippy and snooty. But he could not be boring.”

Surveys show that people are most fascinated by, and most likely to follow, stories involving conflict, violence, disaster, or scandal, as is reflected in the data in Table 7.1. Such stories have the drama that brings in big audiences.

Television is particularly biased toward stories that generate good pictures. Seeing a *talking head* (a shot of a person's face talking directly to the camera) is boring; viewers will switch channels in search of more interesting visual stimulation. For example, during an unusually contentious and lengthy interview of George H. W. Bush by Dan Rather concerning the Iran-Contra scandal in the 1980s, CBS’s ratings actually went down as people tired of watching two talking heads argue. In contrast, ratings can be increased by, say, ambassadors squaring off in a fistfight at the United Nations, a scene CBS showed three times in one day—without once discussing the cause of the fight. The result of this kind of bias, political scientist Lance Bennett points out, is that “the public is exposed to a world driven into chaos by seemingly arbitrary and mysterious forces.”

**THE NEWS AND PUBLIC OPINION**

### 7.3 Analyze the impact of the media on public opinion and political behavior.

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

For many years, students of the subject tended to doubt that the media had more than a marginal effect on public opinion. The “minimal effects hypothesis” stemmed from the fact that early scholars were looking for direct impacts—for example, whether the media affected how people voted. When the focus turned to how the media affect what Americans think about, the effects began to appear more significant. In a series of controlled laboratory experiments, Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder subtly manipulated the stories participants saw on the TV news. They found that they could significantly affect the importance people attached to a given problem by splicing a
TABLE 7.1  STORIES CITIZENS HAVE TUNED IN AND TUNED OUT
Since 1986, the monthly survey of the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press has asked Americans how closely they have followed major news stories. As one would expect, stories involving disaster or human drama have drawn more attention than have complicated issues of public policy. A representative selection of Pew findings is presented here. The percentage in each case is the proportion who reported following the story “very closely.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Story</th>
<th>% Following Closely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The explosion of the space shuttle Challenger in 1986</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon in 2001</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impacts of hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Los Angeles riots in 1992</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rescue of baby Jessica McClure from a well in 1987</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School shootings at Columbine High School in Colorado in 1999</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earthquake in Haiti in 2010</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Start of hostilities against Iraq in 2003</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supreme Court decision on flag burning in 1989</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Killing of Osama bin Laden in a raid by U.S. forces in 2011</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passage of Obama’s health care reform bill in 2010</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrest of O. J. Simpson in 1994</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obama’s decision to send 30,000 additional troops to Afghanistan in 2009</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The partial shutdown of the federal government in 2013</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presidential election outcome in 2000</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex abuse scandal involving Penn State football coaches Joe Paterno and Jerry Sandusky in 2011</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impeachment trial of President Clinton in the Senate in 1999</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How the rollout of Obamacare was going in 2013</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confirmation of Sonia Sotomayor to the Supreme Court in 2009</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obama’s decision to reject the Keystone oil pipeline in 2015</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supreme Court’s Citizens United decision in 2010</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hillary Clinton’s use of a private email account as Secretary of State in 2015</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic violence in the Darfur region of Sudan in 2003</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passage of the Communications Deregulation Bill in 1996</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FDA’s proposal to severely restrict trans fats in foods in 2013</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

few stories about it into the news over the course of a week. Iyengar and Kinder do not maintain that the networks can make something out of nothing or conceal problems that actually exist. But they do conclude that “what television news does, instead, is alter the priorities Americans attach to a circumscribed set of problems, all of which are plausible contenders for public concern.” Subsequent research by Miller and Krosnick has revealed that agenda-setting effects are particularly strong among politically knowledgeable citizens who trust the media. Thus, rather than the media manipulating the public, they argue that agenda setting reflects a deliberate process on the part of sophisticated citizens who rely on what they consider a credible institutional source of information.

Nonetheless, this agenda-setting effect can have a range of far-reaching consequences. First, by increasing public attention to specific problems, the media influence the criteria by which the public evaluates political leaders. When unemployment goes up but inflation goes down, does public support for the president increase or decrease? The answer could depend in large part on which story the media emphasized. The fact that the media emphasized the country’s slow economic growth in 1992 rather than the good news of low inflation and interest rates was clearly instrumental in setting the
stage for Bill Clinton’s ousting the incumbent president, George H. W. Bush, that year. Similarly, the emphasis on continuing economic hardships in 2016 rather than the good news about the declining unemployment rate clearly helped Donald Trump’s campaign, further motivating his discontented base to turn out to vote.

The media can even have a dramatic effect on how the public evaluates specific events by emphasizing one event over others. When, during a 1976 presidential debate, President Ford incorrectly stated that the Soviet Union did not dominate Eastern Europe, the press gave substantial coverage to Ford’s misstatement, and this coverage had an impact on the public. Polls showed that most people did not realize the president had made an error until the press told them so. Afterward, the initial assessment that Ford had won the debate shifted, as voters expressed increased concern about his competence in foreign policymaking. Similarly, the media’s focus on misstatements by Al Gore during the first presidential debate of 2000 had an impact on public opinion. In the days immediately following this debate, the percentage who thought that Gore had beaten Bush declined markedly.

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

**POLICY ENTREPRENEURS AND AGENDA SETTING**

7.4 Describe how politicians use the media to communicate with the electorate.

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

Political activists depend heavily on the media to get their ideas placed high on the governmental agenda. Political activists are often called policy entrepreneurs—people who invest their political “capital” in an issue, just as economic entrepreneurs invest capital in ideas for making money. Kingdon says that policy entrepreneurs can “be in or out of government, in elected or appointed positions, in interest groups or research organizations.”

Policy entrepreneurs’ arsenal of weapons includes press releases, press conferences, and emails; convincing reporters and columnists to tell their side; trading on personal contacts; and, in cases of desperation, resorting to staging dramatic events. Such activities are often shrugged off as self-serving and mere public relations ploys. Political scientist Patrick Sellers firmly disagrees with this view in his study of strategic communication in Congress. In that study, he concludes, “Promotional campaigns are a way to discursively organize public deliberation, allowing political actors to present their arguments and for others to understand and evaluate these arguments.”

The media are not always monopolized by political elites; the poor and downtrodden have access to them too. Civil rights groups in the 1960s relied heavily on the media to tell their stories of unjust treatment. Many believe that the introduction of television helped to accelerate the movement by showing Americans—in the North and South alike—just what the situation was. Protest groups have learned
that if they can stage an interesting event that attracts the media’s attention, at least their point of view will be heard. Radical activist Saul Alinsky once dramatized the plight of one neighborhood by having its residents collect rats and dump them on the mayor’s front lawn. The story was one that local reporters could hardly resist. In 2002, graduate students at the University of California, Irvine, camped out in tents in the campus park to protest the lack of investment in on-campus housing. The prime organizer, a teaching assistant for an introduction to American government course, issued press releases and made calls to news directors urging them to come down and take a look. Soon after several stations put the sorry scene on TV, the university administration gave in to the graduate students’ demands.

Conveying a long-term, positive image through the media is more important than gaining media coverage of a few dramatic events. Policy entrepreneurs, in or out of government, depend on goodwill and good images. Thus, groups, individuals, and even countries sometimes turn to public relations firms to improve their image and their ability to peddle their issue positions.69

The group BlackLivesMatter has recently drawn a lot of media attention. Activist members of the group have often used dramatic images to draw attention to the issue of police brutality in their local area.

UNDERSTANDING THE MASS MEDIA

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

The media act as key linkage institutions between the people and the policymakers and have a profound impact on the political policy agenda. Bernard Cohen goes so far as to say, “No major act of the American Congress, no foreign adventure, no act of diplomacy, no great social reform can succeed unless the press prepares the public mind.”70 If Cohen is right, then the growth of government in America would have been impossible without the media having established the need for it.

The Media and the Scope of Government

The media’s watchdog function helps to keep politicians in check. Notably, this is one aspect of the media’s job performance that Americans consistently evaluate positively. For over two decades, the Pew Research Center for People & the Press has consistently found that a clear majority of the public has said that press criticism of political leaders does more good than harm. In 2013, a Pew Research Center poll found that 68 percent said that press criticism of political leaders is worth it because it keeps leaders from doing things that should not be done, while 21 percent believed criticism
keeps political leaders from doing their jobs. Reporters themselves consider exposing officeholders to be an essential role of the press in a free society. They often hold disparaging views of public officials, seeing them as self-serving, hypocritical, lacking in integrity, and preoccupied with reelection. Thus, it is not surprising that journalists frequently see a need to debunk public officials and their policy proposals.

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

**Individualism and the Media**

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

Television finds it easier to focus on individuals than on groups. As a result, candidate personality has become more important. In part because of this focus on individuals, TV has also affected the relative amount of coverage accorded to the three branches of government. Whereas there are 535 members of Congress, there is only one president. Doris Graber’s study of nightly news broadcasts in 2008–2009 found that 65 percent of the coverage devoted to the three branches was devoted to the president, as compared to 29 percent for Congress. The Supreme Court, which does not
allow TV cameras to cover its proceedings and whose members rarely give interviews, is almost invisible on TV newscasts, receiving a mere 6 percent of the coverage.72

### Democracy and the Media

As Ronald Berkman and Laura Kitch remark, “Information is the fuel of democracy.”73 Although widespread access to information could be the greatest boon to democracy since the secret ballot, most observers think that the great potential of today’s high-tech media has yet to be realized. Noting the vast increase in information available through the news media, Berkman and Kitch state, “If the sheer quantity of news produced greater competency in the citizenry, then we would have a society of political masters.”74 Yet, this is clearly not the case. The rise of the “information society” has not brought about the rise of the “informed society.”

Whenever the media are criticized for being superficial, their defense is to say that this is what people want. Network executives remark that if people suddenly started to watch in-depth shows such as PBS’s NewsHour, then they would gladly imitate them—if people wanted serious coverage of the issues, they would be happy to provide it. They point out that they are in business to make a profit and that, to do so, they must appeal to the maximum number of people. As Matthew Kerbel observes, “The people who bring you the evening news would like it to be informative and entertaining, but when these two values collide, the shared orientations of the television news world push the product inexorably toward the latter.”75 It is not their fault if the resulting news coverage is superficial, network executives argue; blame capitalism or blame the people—most of whom like news to be more entertaining than educational. Thus, if people are not better informed in the high-tech age, it is largely because they do not care to hear about complicated political issues. In this sense, one can say that the people really do rule through the media.
Chapter 7

THE MASS MEDIA TODAY

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

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

REPORTING THE NEWS

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

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

THE NEWS AND PUBLIC OPINION

7.3 Analyze the impact of the media on public opinion and political behavior.

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

POLICY ENTREPRENEURS AND AGENDA SETTING

7.4 Describe how politicians use the media to communicate with the electorate.

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

UNDERSTANDING THE MASS MEDIA

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

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

LEARN THE TERMS

- high-tech politics, p. 193
- mass media, p. 193
- media event, p. 194
- press conferences, p. 195
- investigative journalism, p. 195
- print media, p. 196
- electronic media, p. 196
- narrowcasting, p. 199
- selective exposure, p. 200
- chains, p. 205
- beats, p. 206
- trial balloons, p. 206
- sound bites, p. 208
- talking head, p. 210
- policy agenda, p. 212
- policy entrepreneurs, p. 212
WEB SITES

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

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

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

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

FURTHER READING

Boydstun, Amber E. Making the News: Politics, the Media, and Agenda Setting. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015. A good study of agenda setting in the media, arguing that it does not ebb and flow, but rather suddenly fixates as agenda items go viral.


West, Darrell M. Air Wars: Television Advertising and Social Media in Election Campaigns, 1952–2012. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2013. An analysis of how TV campaign ads have evolved over the past four decades and what impact they have had on elections.