Journalists

The character of the news is shaped by the people who produce it. The people who seek out, write, and produce the news have their own perspectives, passions, interests, and biases. Although a strong norm of objectivity and unbiasedness pervades the journalism profession, it is impossible to expect that reporters, editors, and media owners will always set aside their personal views. What motivates those who produce the news, and how do their personal beliefs and interests shape what we see and hear?

The marketplace of ideas sets out a single objective for the owners of media organizations: making a profit. Owners seek to maintain a successful business, and if their personal political beliefs endanger that business, then those beliefs will quickly be pushed aside by the internal organization in the newspaper or broadcasting station. This has not always been the case. At one time, newspaper publishers exercised a great deal of influence over their papers’ news content. Publishers such as William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer became political powers through their manipulation of news coverage. Hearst, for example, almost single-handedly pushed the United States into war with Spain in 1898 through his newspapers’ relentless coverage of the alleged brutality employed by Spain in its efforts to suppress a rebellion in Cuba, then a Spanish colony. The sinking of the American battleship Maine in Havana Harbor under mysterious circumstances gave Hearst the ammunition he needed to force a reluctant President William McKinley to lead the nation into war. Today, few publishers have that kind of power. The business end dominates the editorial content of papers, although a few continue to impose their interests and tastes on the news.

Individual reporters and editors have far more influence today over what is presented in the news day in and day out. They also pursue their interests and professional objectives. The goals and incentives of journalists are varied, but they often include considerations of ratings, career success and professional prestige, and political influence. For all of these reasons, journalists seek not only to report the news but also to interpret it. Journalists’ goals have a good deal of influence on what is created and reported as news.

Those journalists who cover the news for the national media generally have considerable discretion or freedom to interpret stories and, as a result, have an opportunity to interject their own views and ideals into news stories. For example, some reporters’ personal friendship with and respect for Franklin Delano Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy helped generate more favorable news coverage for those presidents. On the other hand, many reporters’ dislike of and distrust for Richard Nixon was also communicated to the public. In the case of Ronald Reagan, the disdain that many journalists felt for the president was communicated in stories suggesting that he was often asleep or inattentive when important decisions were made.

Do Journalists Bias the News? From the perspective of the marketplace of ideas, perhaps the most troubling concern is the possibility that journalism on the whole is biased heavily in favor of one party or another or one set of ideals or another. Journalists lean decidedly to the left in their personal political beliefs. Surveys of
reporters and editors at major media outlets have repeatedly found that those who produce the news are overwhelmingly liberal and Democratic. Surveys of journalists sponsored by the Pew Center for Excellence and by the Knight Foundation have found repeatedly that Democrats and liberals outnumber Republicans and conservatives by about 2 to 1 among journalists. A Knight Foundation survey conducted by Professor Dan Weaver of Indiana University found that 36 percent of journalists (across all media) identify as Democrats, while 18 percent identify as Republicans; 33 percent say that they do not identify with any party and 13 percent identify with another party. The Pew survey found that most journalists identify themselves as moderates, but those who do claim an ideological orientation are decidedly more liberal than conservative. Of national reporters, 34 percent state that they are liberal and 7 percent say they are conservative, while 54 percent say they are moderates. Of local reporters, 23 percent are liberal and 12 percent are conservative, while 61 percent say they are moderates. Even among the radio talk-show hosts, Democrats outnumber Republicans by a wide margin: of 112 hosts surveyed, 39 percent had voted for the Democrat in the most recent presidential election, and only 23 percent had supported the Republican. Generally speaking, reporters for major national news outlets tend to be more liberal than their local counterparts, who often profess moderate or even conservative views.

Do these political biases color the news? A classic study by Michael Robinson and Margaret Sheehan of CBS and the *New York Times* in the 1980s suggested that there was little evidence of political favoritism or bias. Subsequent studies by the Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism echo that conclusion. Comparing the press coverage of the first 100 days of presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, the Pew Project found nearly identical patterns of coverage. About half of printed stories were neutral toward the new presidents; a quarter were positive and a quarter negative. Interestingly, Barack Obama received a much different welcome from the press. Using the same methodology, the Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism found that Obama’s coverage was considerably more positive. Obama received positive coverage in 42 percent of stories, neutral coverage in 38 percent of stories, and negative coverage in 20 percent of stories.

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More subtle biases do exist, usually arising from the nature of the language used. A 2005 academic study by the political economists Timothy Groseclose and Jeffrey Milyo found that reporters use ideologically loaded terms when referring to some politicians but not others. Press reports typically mention both parties in a story, but they do so with no small degree of editorializing, using words like radical or extreme conservative to describe one politician or another. Analysis of such language revealed that most major media outlets slanted their reporting to the left, with three important exceptions. The Wall Street Journal and Fox News leaned to the right. Only PBS—the publicly owned and licensed network—presented balanced and evenhanded reporting of politics, government, and current events.  

Editorial endorsements of papers offer further evidence of political leanings of news organizations. Editor and Publisher, a trade journal of the media business, tracks endorsements of newspapers across the United States. Before the 1960s, the editorial endorsements and political leanings of the editors of most newspapers were overwhelmingly Republican. Since the 1960s, however, newspaper endorsements for president, the U.S. Senate, the U.S. House, and statewide offices have on average balanced out between the Democrats and Republicans. George W. Bush received a solid majority (192 of 344) of endorsements in 2000; John Kerry edged Bush out in 2004; in 2008, Barack Obama received nearly 70 percent of the endorsements over John McCain; and in 2012, Mitt Romney just edged out Obama (Figure 14.2). The papers endorsing Obama had a circulation totaling tens of millions more than the papers that endorsed Romney, however.  

To the extent that there is a partisan bias to editorials and endorsements, it is toward those already in office.  

Journalism, as a profession, has attempted to rise above personal motivations and biases. Most journalists adhere to strong norms of fairness and balance in reporting. They attempt to get the perspectives of both sides of a controversy. Even coverage of popular presidents still attempts to maintain balance. Indeed, one of the values of treating journalism as a profession is that doing so forces norms of behavior and ethics that help reduce political biases. But that important ethos of objectivity and fairness appears to be changing.  

Two shifts in journalism are eroding the professional standards of objectivity. The first of these shifts is the blurring of the line between editorializing and reporting in traditional media. Over the past decade, the emergence of Fox News, MSNBC, and the Huffington Post have attempted to change that ethos of objectivity by presenting more ideological and partisan versions of the news, with Fox News on the right and MSNBC on the left. Many traditional journalists have been tempted to follow suit. Among professional journalists much


is made of the battle among the cable networks to divide the audience along partisan lines. In a widely read opinion piece, Tom Edsall, a long-time journalist with four decades of experience covering every level of American government, wrote that it was time for all journalists to throw off the norm of nonpartisanship and fairness. Edsall, now a regular columnist for the Huffington Post, argues that Fox News and its large audience had changed the old norms. The gloves are off, and, at least from Edsall’s corner, it is time for traditional journalists, most of whom have a liberal orientation, to take on the challenge from the conservatives directly.

Citizen Journalism. The second shift in journalism is more profound and may perhaps be more far-reaching. That is the emergence of citizen journalism. New technologies such as smartphones, powerful laptop computers, and the Internet now make it possible for anyone to report on events. CNN has a regular feature called i-Reporter that feeds video sent by people at events, such as natural disasters, campaigns and other political events, and political protests and rebellions. Needless to say, this is a huge threat to traditional journalism, which relies on highly trained professionals. A newspaper or television station does not need a large bureau in order to get instant recordings of events, and journalists cost money to keep on staff and to deploy to faraway places such as China or Iraq. By the same token, these technologies have allowed journalism to flourish in countries with very little existing media or tight government controls on television and the press, such as those in central Africa and the Middle East.

The subtle revolution behind the rise of citizen journalism comes from the perspective of the reporter. Citizen journalism replaces the “objective reporter” with the “subjective participant.” A traditional reporter from the New York Times, the AP, or another agency will try to get different perspectives on the same event and offer a investigative report that attempts to answer the key questions (also known as the 5 Ws and 1H) taught on day one of Journalism 101: what, who, when, where, why, and how? Citizen journalists become reporters of an event precisely because they are in the event. A protestor who sends a video of a violent clash with police in Damascus or Tripoli or London is “in the event,” as are a legislative staffer who tweets about the goings-on in a committee meeting or a campaign worker who tweets about a rally. There is no attempt to rise above and answer the 5 Ws. The texts and videos from such communications are raw and in the moment; they are some of the most compelling journalism today. This represents a sea change in journalism. It will not replace the old style, which has been around for centuries and survived many a technological revolution. Rather, citizen journalism will augment traditional journalism and even change it somewhat. It gives traditional journalists license to also be “in the moment,” in other words, to be more subjective.

News Sources

News Leaks. A news leak is the disclosure of confidential information to the news media. Leaks may emanate from a variety of sources, including whistle-blowers, lower-level officials who hope to publicize what they view as their bosses’ improper activities. In 1971, for example, a minor Defense Department staffer named Daniel Ellsberg sought to discredit official justifications for America’s involvement in Vietnam by leaking top-secret documents to the press. The New York Times and the Washington Post published these classified documents, the so-called Pentagon Papers, after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the government could not block release of the documents. In a similar vein, President George W. Bush was infuriated in 2005 when he learned that a still-unidentified source, presumed to be a whistle-blower, had leaked information concerning the president’s secret orders authorizing the National Security
Agency to conduct clandestine surveillance of suspected terrorists without obtaining authorization from the special federal tribunal created for that purpose. Bush ordered the Justice Department to launch a probe of the leak. In 2006, a still-unidentified source leaked to the press part of a secret intelligence summary that seemed to contradict the administration’s claims of progress in the war in Iraq. The president claimed the leaked portion of the report did not accurately reflect the full report. The administration proceeded to declassify other portions of the report, which seemed to support its claims about the war. President Barack Obama pursued an even stronger line against press leaks in his administration. The Obama administration aggressively and successfully prosecuted one Defense Department worker and one FBI analyst who had leaked information to the press in 2009.

Most leaks, though, originate not with low-level whistle-blowers but rather with senior government officials and prominent politicians and political activists. Such persons often cultivate long-term relationships with journalists, to whom they regularly leak confidential information, knowing that it is likely to be published on a priority basis in a form acceptable to them. Their confidence is based on the fact that journalists are likely to regard high-level sources of confidential information as valuable assets whose favor must be retained. For example, I. Lewis “Scooter” Libby, former vice president Dick Cheney’s chief of staff, was apparently such a valuable source of leaks to so many prominent journalists that his name was seldom mentioned in the newspapers despite his prominence in Washington and his importance as a decision maker. And the more recipients of leaked information strive to keep their sources secret, the more difficulty other journalists will have in checking the validity of the information.

Through such tacit alliances with journalists, prominent figures can manipulate news coverage and secure the publication of stories that serve their purposes. The Valerie Plame affair, which was ultimately the undoing of Scooter Libby, exposed the complexities of the culture of leaks in Washington, D.C. Plame was an undercover CIA analyst married to Joseph Wilson, a prominent career diplomat. Wilson had angered the Bush White House by making a number of statements that were critical of the president’s policies in Iraq. In an apparent effort to discredit Wilson, one or more administration officials informed prominent journalists that Plame had improperly used her position to help Wilson. In so doing, these officials may have violated a federal statute prohibiting the disclosure of the identities of covert intelligence operatives. The subsequent investigation revealed that the story had been leaked to several journalists, including the Washington Post’s Bob Woodward, who did not use it, and the New York Times’s Judith Miller, who did. Miller spent several months in jail for contempt of court after initially refusing to testify before a federal grand jury looking into the leak. After Miller finally testified, Libby was charged and convicted of lying and obstruction for his role in the affair, although it later emerged that the information was actually leaked by a former State Department official, Richard Armitage. The leak

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in the Plame case came to light only because it might have been illegal. Thousands of other leaks each year are quietly and seamlessly incorporated into the news.

**The Press Release.** Also seamlessly incorporated into daily news reports each year are thousands of press releases. The press release, sometimes called a news release, is a story written by an advocate or publicist and distributed to the media in the hope that journalists will publish it under their own bylines with little or no revision. The inventor of the press release was a New York public relations consultant named Ivy Lee. In 1906, a train operated by one of Lee’s clients, the Pennsylvania Railroad, was involved in a serious wreck. Lee quickly wrote a story about the accident that presented the railroad in a favorable light and distributed the account to reporters. Many papers published Lee’s slanted story as their own objective account of events, and the railroad’s reputation for quality and safety remained intact.

Consistent with Lee’s example, today’s press release presents facts and perspectives that serve an advocate’s interests but is written in a way that mimics the factual news style of the paper, periodical, or television news program to which it has been sent. It is quite difficult for the audience to distinguish a well-designed press release from a news story. For example, a recent posting by PharmaWatch, a blog monitoring the pharmaceutical industry, identified an article published in the *New York Times* “Science Times” section that rehashed a news release issued by Pfizer, the giant pharmaceutical corporation. “A lawyer in New York has had to deal with what is politely referred to as ‘bladder control’ for as long as she can remember,” the article began. Thanks to the press release it copied, the article was able to propose a solution. “Urge incontinence is often treated with drugs like tolterodine, sold as Detrol.”³³ Not surprisingly, the drug touted in this news story is sold by Pfizer.

To take another example, an article sent to thousands of newspapers by the AP was headlined “Fed Unveils Financial Education Website.” Apparently written by an AP reporter, the article discussed the various ways in which a new website developed by the Federal Reserve could help consumers make informed decisions. The article did not mention that the information was basically a slight revision of a press release that could be found on the Federal Reserve’s website.³⁴ And what about the June 2005 *Los Angeles Times* story “County Homeless Number 90,000”? This article claimed, without offering an explanation, that the number of homeless individuals in Los Angeles County had quintupled since the previous year. In presenting this shocking news of the increase in homelessness, though, the reporter neglected to mention that the data came from a press release issued by the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA), whose budget is tied to the number of clients it serves. For the LAHSA, more homelessness equals more money and more staff.

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Indeed, on its own website, it indicated that it had undertaken its new count of homeless individuals in part to “increase funding for homeless services in our community.”35 These should not be seen as isolated examples. According to some experts, more than 50 percent of the articles in a newspaper on any given day are based on press releases. Indeed, more than 75 percent of the journalists responding to a recent survey acknowledged using press releases for their stories.36

Journalists are certainly aware of the fact that the authors of press releases have their own agendas and are hardly unbiased reporters of the news. Nevertheless, the economics of publishing and broadcasting dictate that large numbers of stories will always be based on press releases. Newspapers and television stations are businesses, and for many the financial bottom line is more important than journalistic integrity.37 The use of press releases allows a newspaper or a broadcast network to present more stories without paying more staff or incurring the other costs associated with investigating and writing the news. As one newspaper executive said, the public relations people who generally write news releases are our “unpaid reporters.”38

In recent years, the simple printed press release has been joined by the video news release, which is designed especially for television stations. The video release is a taped report, usually about 90 seconds long, the typical length of a television news story, designed to look and sound like any other broadcast news segment. In exchange for airing material that serves the interests of some advocate, the television station airing the video release is relieved of the considerable expense and bother of identifying and filming its own news story. The audience is usually unaware that the “news” it is watching is someone’s canned publicity footage.

One example of a video news release was a pair of 90-second segments funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). After Congress enacted legislation adding a prescription drug benefit to the Medicare program, HHS sent a video release designed to look like a news report to local TV stations around the nation. Forty television stations aired the report without indicating that it had come from the government or that the “reporter” identified in the report was an employee of the ad agency hired by the government to create the video release. In response to criticism, an HHS spokesperson pointed out that the same sort of video news releases had often been used by

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37 See, for example, Davis Merritt, Knightfall: Knight Ridder and How the Erosion of Newspaper Journalism Is Putting Democracy at Risk (New York: Amacom Books, 2005).

38 Quoted in Wilcox and Cameron, Public Relations, p. 357.
the Clinton administration and was commonly used by a number of firms and interest groups. "The use of video news releases is a common, routine practice in government and the private sector," he said. "Anyone who has questions about this practice needs to do some research on modern public information tools."39

**Hiring Reporters.** From creating phony reporters to reading make-believe news stories, it is but a small step to hiring real reporters to present sham accounts. A number of cases have come to light in recent years in which the government or a private concern has paid journalists to write favorable accounts of its activities and efforts. Late in 2005, for example, the U.S. military acknowledged that contractors in its employ had regularly paid Iraqi newspapers to carry positive news about American efforts in that nation. The Washington-based Lincoln Group, a public-relations firm working under contract for the federal government, says it placed more than 1,000 news stories in the Arab press since 2001. 40 Iraqis reading the articles would have had no way of knowing that the material presented was produced at the behest of the American authorities.

The government's practice of hiring journalists is not limited to operations abroad. In recent years, federal agencies have paid several journalists and commentators to report favorably on government initiatives and programs in the United States. The Department of Education, for example, paid the commentator Armstrong Williams $241,000 to promote President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind Act. Williams wrote favorably about the law in his newspaper column, commented positively about it during his cable television appearances, and urged other commentators to interview Education Secretary Roderick Paige. 41 Williams did not disclose his financial relationship with the agency whose programs he was touting. Similarly, the Department of Health and Human Services paid the syndicated columnist Maggie Gallagher $20,000 to promote the administration's views on marriage. Gallagher wrote several columns on the topic without revealing her financial relationship with the administration.

As local newspaper budgets have shrunk, some local governments have hired reporters or paid newspapers for reporters to cover local government. The Metropolitan Government of Portland, Oregon, hires a local reporter to cover goings-on in the government, including council meetings, events, and changes in policies and laws. The Los Angeles Kings hockey franchise, a Los Angeles County Supervisor, and a California trial lawyers group all hire journalists to follow their activities. The list goes on.

One group especially noted for paying writers and reporters for favorable coverage is the pharmaceutical industry. As the Detroit example suggests, many

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of the articles that appear in popular—and even scientific—journals reporting favorably on particular drugs are written by the drug companies themselves. In some cases, the writers are actually paid by the drug companies; in other reported instances, the writer cited in the story’s byline is not the actual author of the account. Often a ghostwriter employed by a drug company writes the story while the nominal author is paid for the use of his name.42

All of these practices—hiring of reporters, press leaks, and planted news stories—offend our sensibilities about what the news is because we expect a degree of objectivity from reporters. They are our main source of information, and fair and balanced reporting helps us sort out sometimes complex issues. The media also play an important watchdog role. They are there to make noise when something is amiss. That becomes increasingly difficult if the main revenues for the news come from the firm or government agency being covered. Of course, although politicians try to use the media for their purposes, reporters often have their own agenda. Often enough, hostile or merely determined journalists will break through the smoke screens thrown up by the politicians and report annoying truths.

Consumers

The print and broadcast media are businesses that, in general, seek to show a profit. This means that like any other business they must cater to the preferences of consumers. Their doing so has very important consequences for the content and character of the news media. The long-term health and success of the media as a political institution depends on their ability to find a sizable audience. The Analyzing the Evidence unit considers how market-level factors have influenced consumers’ interest in following the news.

Catering to the Upscale Audience. In general and especially in the political realm, the print and broadcast media and the publishing industry are not only responsive to the interests of consumers generally but are also particularly responsive to the interests and views of the better-educated and more affluent segments of the audience. The preferences of these segments have a profound effect on the content and orientation of the press, radio and television programming, and books, especially in the areas of news and public affairs.43

Affluent and well-educated consumers are the core audience of newsmagazines, journals of opinion, books dealing with public affairs, serious newspapers such as the New York Times and the Washington Post, broadcast news, and evening


Where Does Interest in the News Come From?

The audiences for newspaper, television, and radio news have been shrinking. If an informed citizenry is important to democracy, this decline might be alarming. What explains people’s choices to follow the news, and can this trend be reversed? Previous research has assumed that the choice to follow news is largely a function of individual-level factors: those who regularly follow the news tend to be older, more educated, and more knowledgeable about politics than those who rarely follow the news. To the extent that these factors matter, news audiences should be evenly distributed around the country, and recent losses in the size of audiences for traditional news sources may be difficult to reverse.

However, market-level factors might also play a role in the choice to follow news. There are more than 200 media markets in the United States, each offering its own local news coverage. Larger markets surrounding major cities tend to have a wider variety of choices than smaller markets and are able to satisfy a broader range of audience demands. Within each market, people talk to one another about what they learn from the news and where they’ve learned it from. To the extent that these market-level factors drive the choice to follow news, audiences for different types of news should be distributed unevenly around the country and changes in the structure of media markets could potentially reverse the shrinking audiences for news.

As the following maps make clear, there is a geographic pattern to news interest. Cable news viewing is more common in the southeastern United States than in the northwestern states, and newspaper reading is more common in northern states than in southern states.
Research assessing the relative contribution of individual- and market-level factors shows that while both matter, market-level factors such as the number of local television stations and the amount of advertising revenue available to support news programming tend to explain more variation in news consumption than individual-level factors. This chart summarizes research that predicts how often people follow different types of news. Only for online news and talk radio consumption do individual-level factors explain as much variance as market-level factors. Between half and two-thirds of the variation in how frequently people follow news on television and newspapers can be explained by market-level factors alone.

Thus the choice to follow news tends to be influenced less by individual characteristics than by the programming choices available, which can be affected by the market and by policy regulation. As a result, the development of new technologies for accessing news content online could bring about important changes in levels of news consumption.

**Explaining Variation in News Consumption**

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<th>Medium</th>
<th>Individual-level factors</th>
<th>Market-level factors</th>
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<td>Newspapers</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>45</td>
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<tr>
<td>Local TV news</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>32</td>
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<tr>
<td>Network TV news</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>66</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cable TV news</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>62</td>
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<tr>
<td>Online news</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>58</td>
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<tr>
<td>Talk radio</td>
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**Source:**
and weekend public affairs programming. Of course, other segments of the public also read newspapers and watch the television news. Overall, however, level of interest in “hard news” (world events, national political issues, and the like) is closely related to level of education (Table 14.2). As a result, upscale Americans are overrepresented in the news and public affairs audience. The concentration of these strata in the audience makes news, politics, and public affairs potentially very attractive topics to advertisers, publishers, radio broadcasters, and television executives.

As a result, entire categories of events, issues, and phenomena of interest to lower-, middle-, and working-class Americans receive scant attention from the national print and broadcast media. For example, trade union news and events are discussed only in the context of major strikes or revelations of corruption. No network or national periodical routinely covers labor organizations. Religious and church affairs receive little coverage unless scandal is involved. The activities of veterans’, fraternal, ethnic, and patriotic organizations are also generally ignored.

The rise of new media sources has not altered this picture. For example, a recent study by Markus Prior of the rise of cable television shows that the restructuring of television from three networks to a vast range of cable venues during the 1980s and 1990s actually increased the knowledge gap among different groups in the electorate. Further, Professor Gary Jacobson’s research found that viewers of different cable news channels (for example, Fox News,

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<th>TABLE 14.2</th>
<th>EDUCATION AND ATTENTION TO THE NEWS</th>
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<td>LEVEL OF EDUCATION</td>
<td>LEVEL OF ATTENTION TO HARD NEWS*</td>
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<td></td>
<td>HIGH (%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>College graduate</td>
<td>36</td>
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<td>Some college</td>
<td>30</td>
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<tr>
<td>High school graduate</td>
<td>23</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not a high school graduate</td>
<td>12</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* People with high levels of attention to hard news follow international, national, local, and business news closely; those with low levels do not follow the news.

MSNBC, and CNN) held widely varying beliefs about basic facts concerning public affairs. Professor Jacobson’s research contrasts sharply with research in the 1970s on CBS, NBC, and ABC, which found that the three main networks tended to present the news from similar perspectives. The three networks would provide the same information in the same way as each other and as print media.

**The Media and Conflict.** Although the media respond most to the upscale audience, groups that cannot afford the services of media consultants and issues managers can publicize their views and interests through protest. Frequently, the media are accused of encouraging conflict and even violence in response to the fact that their audiences mostly watch news for the entertainment value that conflict can provide. Clearly, conflict can be an important vehicle for attracting the attention and interest of the media and thus may provide an opportunity for media attention to groups otherwise lacking the financial or organizational resources to broadcast their views. But although conflict and protest can succeed in drawing media attention, these methods ultimately do not allow groups from the bottom of the social ladder to compete effectively in the media.

The chief problem with protest as a media technique is that, in general, the media on which the protesters depend have considerable discretion in reporting and interpreting the events they cover. For example, should the media focus on the conflict itself, rather than on the issues or concerns created by the conflict? The answer to this question is typically determined by the media, not by the protesters. Therefore, media interpretation of protest activities is more a reflection of the views of the groups and forces to which the media are responsive—which, as we have seen, are usually segments of the upper middle class—than it is a function of the wishes of the protesters themselves. It is worth noting that civil rights protesters received their most favorable media coverage when a segment of the white upper middle class saw blacks as potential political allies in the Democratic Party.

Typically, upper-middle-class protesters—student demonstrators and the like—have little difficulty securing favorable publicity for themselves and their causes. They are often more skilled than their lower-class counterparts in the techniques of media manipulation. That is, they typically have a better sense—often as a result of formal courses on the subject—of how to package messages for media consumption. For example, it is important to know what time of day a protest should occur if it is to be carried on the evening news. Similarly, the setting, definition of the issues, character of the rhetoric used, and so on all help determine whether a protest will receive favorable media coverage, unfavorable

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coverage, or no coverage at all. Moreover, upper-middle-class protesters can often produce their own media coverage through “underground” newspapers, college papers, student radio and television stations, and the Internet. The same resources and skills that generally allow upper-middle-class people to publicize their ideas are usually not left behind when segments of this class choose to engage in disruptive forms of political action. Note the media attention given antiwar protesters in 2003 even though polls indicated that such groups were a minor force in American politics.

CONCLUSION: MEDIA POWER AND RESPONSIBILITY

The content and character of news and public affairs programming—what the media choose to present and how they present it—can have far-reaching political consequences. Media disclosures can greatly enhance or fatally damage the careers of public officials. Media coverage can rally support for or intensify opposition to national policies. The media choose what issues to cover and how and, as discussed in Chapter 9, set the national political agenda and frame political discourse.

The media have played a central role in shaping some of the most significant events in recent American political history. News media were critically important in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Television footage and photographs of civil rights marchers attacked by club-swinging police galvanized public support for the civil rights movement among northern whites and greatly increased pressure on Congress to bring an end to segregation. The media were also central actors in the Watergate affair, which ultimately forced President Richard Nixon, the landslide victor in the 1972 presidential election, to resign from office in disgrace. The relentless series of investigations launched by the Washington Post, the New York Times, and the television networks led to the disclosure of various abuses of power by those in the White House, ultimately forcing Nixon to resign.

Mass media have been central to every election of the past century. They cover the emergence and activities of the candidates, political debates and conventions, and election-night returns. They are the vehicles for political advertising. They even generate their own campaign news, especially by conducting public-opinion polls and reporting who is ahead and who is behind, who is gaining momentum and who is fading.

And the media go to war along with the U.S. military. Since the American Civil War, news reporting and photography have brought wars home. Graphic depictions of the atrocities in Vietnam, including the My Lai massacre, and of American war dead and wounded helped turn popular sentiment against the war, which compelled the government to negotiate an end to the conflict. Video of precision bombs destroying targets in Baghdad and of the rout of Saddam Hussein’s army in 1991 pushed up President George H. W. Bush’s popularity and solidified his reputation as commander in chief. News coverage of the Iraq War in 2003 portrayed the toppling of Saddam Hussein’s statue in Baghdad, and President George W. Bush’s announcement of “Mission Accomplished” at the end of combat in 2003 would later be used against the president as the military struggled for years to restore a modicum of stability in Iraq.

The tremendous power that reporters and editors sometimes wield emanates from the free hand that the press has in American politics. So long as they do not overstep the bounds of libel, journalists can (and often do) criticize the American government openly. Given the diversity of media outlets today, especially after the rise of cable television and the Internet, it is not uncommon to find defenders and critics of the government or of particular political decisions, and often those on either side of the debate argue their positions side by side. The rise of the new media has brought more voices to the fore and a broader potential debate over public policy. Wide-open debate and criticism of public officials is essential, but it sometimes exacts a social cost.

Free media are essential to democratic government. We depend on the media to investigate wrongdoing, publicize and explain governmental actions, evaluate programs and politicians, and bring to light matters that might otherwise be known only to a handful of government insiders. In short, without free and active media, popular government would be virtually impossible. Citizens would have few means of knowing or assessing the government’s actions, other than the claims or pronouncements of the government itself. Moreover, without active—and indeed, aggressive—media, citizens would be hard-pressed to make informed choices among competing candidates at the polls. Often enough, the media reveal discrepancies between candidates’ claims and their records and between the images that candidates seek to project and the underlying realities.

At the same time, politicians have become ever more reliant on news coverage, especially favorable coverage. National political leaders and journalists have had symbiotic relationships, at least since Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s presidency. Initially, politicians were the senior partners. Thus, for example, reporters did not publicize potentially embarrassing information, widely known in Washington, D.C., about the personal lives of such figures as Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy. Today, the balance has shifted. Often it seems the journalists have the upper hand. Now that individual politicians have become heavily dependent

on media to reach their constituents, journalists no longer need fear that their access to information can be restricted in retaliation for negative coverage. It is not uncommon today to hear the White House press corps challenge the president’s press liaison or even the president himself.

Freedom gives the media enormous power. The media can make or break reputations, help launch or destroy political careers, and build support for or rally opposition against programs and institutions. 49 Wherever there is so much power, at least the potential for its abuse or overly zealous use exists. All things considered, free media are so critically important to the maintenance of a democratic society that we may be willing to take the risk that the media will occasionally abuse their power. The forms of government control that would prevent the media from misusing their power would also certainly pose a serious risk to our freedom.

For Further Reading

Selections highlighted in red are included in Readings in American Politics: Analysis and Perspectives, Third Edition.


