

CNN PROJECTION

BARACK OBAMA  
RE-ELECTED PRESIDENT

FOX NEWS  
LIVE

PRESIDENT

OBAMA 275

OBAMA

ROMNEY

OBAMA 275  
ROMNEY 203

Kevin Dietsch/UP/Newscom

## CHAPTER 12

# The Media

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 12-1** Trace the evolution of the press in America, explaining how media coverage of politics has changed over time.
- 12-2** Summarize the most important sources of news for contemporary Americans, and discuss the consequences of consuming different news sources.
- 12-3** Explain the main political functions of the media in America, and discuss how the media both enhance and detract from American democracy.
- 12-4** Discuss the reasons behind lower levels of media trust today, and summarize the arguments for and against media bias.
- 12-5** Explain how government controls and regulates the media.

Suppose you want to influence how other people think about health, politics, sports, or celebrities. What would you do? At one time, you might write a book or publish an essay in a newspaper or magazine. But unless you were very lucky, the book or article would only reach a few people. Today, you will have a much bigger impact if you can get on television or post your findings on a popular news website or blog. Vastly more people watch *American Idol* than read newspaper editorials; many more get opinions from blogs—such as the Daily Kos on the left or Power Line on the right—than read essays in magazines.

Television and the Internet are key parts of the New Media; newspapers and magazines are part of the Old Media. And while both still matter, new media have become more important in recent years, and will be stronger still in the years to come.

## THEN

In 1972–1974, the Nixon administration’s efforts to cover up the burglary of Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate hotel in Washington, D.C., were revealed through a series of articles published in *The Washington Post*, which gained national fame for its riveting news coverage by journalists Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein.<sup>1</sup> In the summer of 1987, Congress held live, televised hearings about the Iran-Contra scandal, which captivated viewers.

## NOW

In 2004, *60 Minutes*, a CBS television news program, ran a story claiming that President Bush had performed poorly during his time in the Air National Guard. Within a few hours, bloggers produced evidence that the documents underlying this charge were forgeries, something CBS later conceded was true. Not long afterward, the producer and newscaster responsible for the charges left CBS. In 2011, reports that the United States had captured and killed Osama bin Laden first appeared on the online site Twitter. In 2012, someone secretly recorded Mitt Romney at a fundraiser speaking about the “47 percent” of Americans who would not vote for him because they were dependent on government programs. These remarks were released online and the story spread rapidly (a similar thing happened to President Obama during the 2008 campaign).

Social media are becoming a regular news source for people: A 2012 study found that almost one-fifth of Americans reported seeing news or headlines on a social networking site, almost twice as many as in 2010. Only 13 percent of adults under age 30 read a newspaper, either in print or electronically, and the number of people getting news from television or radio continued to decline, while use of online/mobile news sources increased (though more

people still watch television news than view news online).<sup>2</sup> The media landscape is shifting dramatically every year.

## 12-1 The Media and Politics

The Internet is an important new venue for politics, but it presents similar challenges for politicians as earlier technological advances in communication. From the beginning of the Republic, public officials have tried to get the media on their side while knowing that, because the media love controversy, they are as likely to attack as to praise. The Internet may strike some politicians as the solution to this problem: They think that if they put their own web pages out there, they can reach the voters directly. They can, but so can rival politicians with their own web pages.

All of this takes place in a country so committed to a free press that there is little the government can do to control the process. As we shall see, there have been efforts to control radio and television as a result of the government’s right to license broadcasters, but most of these attempts have evaporated.

Even strongly democratic nations restrict the press more than the United States. For example, the laws governing libel are much stricter in the United Kingdom than in the United States. As a result, it is easier in the United Kingdom for politicians to sue newspapers for publishing articles that defame or ridicule them. In this country, the libel laws make it almost impossible to prevent press criticisms of public figures. Moreover, England has an Official Secrets Act that can be used to punish any past or present public officials who leak information to the press.<sup>3</sup> In this country, leaking information occurs all the time, and our Freedom of Information Act makes it relatively easy for the press to extract documents from the government.

European governments can be much tougher on people who make controversial statements than the American political system. In 2006, an Austrian court sentenced a man to three years in prison for having denied that the Nazi death camp at Auschwitz killed its inmates. A French court convicted a distinguished American historian for telling a French newspaper that the slaughter of Armenians may not have been the result of planned effort. An Italian journalist stood trial for having written things “offensive to Islam.” In this country, such statements would be protected by the Constitution even if, as with the man who denied the existence of the Holocaust, they were profoundly wrong.<sup>4</sup>

America has a long tradition of privately owned media. By contrast, private ownership of television has come only recently to other nations, such as France. And the Internet is not owned by anybody: Here and in many nations, people can say or read whatever they want on their computers. Newspapers in this country require no



**DAILY KOS**  NEWS · COMMUNITY · ACTION

PEOPLE GROUPS DIARIES TAGS LABOR COMICS ELECTIONS ECON RADIO

THU MAY 21, 2015 AT 01:30 PM PDT

## Jeb Bush is partly right. Somebody is definitely 'intellectually arrogant' about climate change

by Meteor Blades

Share 1 Tweet 2 25 Comments / 25 New



That arrogance does not, however, come from the scientists behind the 97 percent of peer-reviewed papers that say civilization's emissions of greenhouse gases are driving climate change. Nor do the scientists of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change who are 95

Subscribe or Donate to support Daily Kos.

★★★★★  
**"Superb Service"**  
 Sean - Dallas, TX

**Safelite**.AutoGlass

COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT

- The Ever-Mutating Iraq Call to Arms: A Recollection**  
 by pistols at dawn 31/31 New 33 Recs
- Now where'd I put that blue marble...**  
 by Hammerhand 21/21 New 32 Recs
- Are you tired of studies saying loneliness will kill you? So am I!**  
 by Lucy Montrose 70/70 New 48 Recs
- Wonder What Bin Ladin Read in Bed?**  
 by Limeite 42/42 New 17 Recs

www.dailykos.com

**POWERLINE** @POWERLINEUS E-MAIL US

HOME LIVE ABOUT US NEWS EVENTS SERIES

Picks

- |   |  |  |  |
|---|--|--|--|
| Man put in charge of feminism at last—<br>THE ONION | Letterman, the last American<br>broadcaster — JASON GAY, WSJ | Rand Paul's dangerous unseriousness<br>— J. KIRCHICK, COMMENTARY | A recipe for failure — PETER BERKOWITZ,<br>RCP                       |
| Think like a lib—or else — VICTOR D.<br>HANSON, NR  | George Clintonopoulos! — LARRY ELDER,<br>JWR                 | Iran deal catastrophic for Israel — E.<br>OTTOLENGHI, TABLET     | Hold on to your hats—"change" is<br>coming — E.P. FOLEY, INSTAPUNDIT |

MAY 21, 2015 — STEVEN HAYWARD

### THIS WEEK'S ENERGY UNICORN



The belief that we can power the world with unicorn flop sweat, Obama's incandescent speeches, refined banana peels, etc runs deep. I call it "energy romanticism," and like all other kinds of romanticism it is hard to shake, even with things called facts, which are always inconvenient to the dreams of world-saving liberals. Typical is the story last year about how we could put solar panels on roads, a really »

13 RESPONSES READ MORE...

MAY 21, 2015 — JOHN HINDERAKER

### DELUSIONAL WHITE HOUSE CALLS ISIS STRATEGY "A SUCCESS"



As I wrote on Monday, the administration's policies on the Middle East are in a state of collapse. This is partly—but only partly—

MAY 21, 2015 — PAUL MIRENGOFF

### MORE EVIDENCE, VIA "SID VICIOUS," OF HILLARY'S BENGHAZI DECEIT



Some of the information Sidney Blumenthal supplied to Hillary Clinton about Libya is said to have been flawed. But "Sid

**Subscribe now!**

**it's huge!**   
 GRAND OPENING Nebraska Furniture Mart  
 Furniture • Flooring • Appliances • Electronics • Mattresses

Most Read on Power Line

- ▶ Hell to pay in Baltimore
- ▶ Hillary Clinton, "Sid Vicious," and Libya
- ▶ Democrats: White Males Need Not Apply
- ▶ Is Hillary's Glass Jaw Starting to Crack Already?

Courtesy of Power Line Blog

*Blogs, both conservative and liberal, have become an important form of political communication.*

government permission to operate, but radio and television stations need licenses granted by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). These licenses must be renewed periodically. On occasion, the White House has made efforts to use license renewals as a way of influencing station owners who were out of political favor, but of late the level of FCC control over what is broadcast has lessened.

There are two potential limits to the freedom of privately owned newspapers and broadcast stations. First, they must make a profit. Some critics believe the need for profit will lead media outlets to distort the news in order to satisfy advertisers or to build an audience. Though there is some truth to this argument, it is too simple. Every media outlet must satisfy a variety of people—advertisers, subscribers, listeners, reporters, and editors—and balancing those demands is complicated and will be done differently by different owners.

The second problem is media bias. If most of the reporters and editors have similar views about politics and if they act on those views, then the media will give us only one side of many stories. Later in this chapter, we take a close look at whether the media are actually biased.

## Journalism in American Political History

Important changes in the nature of American politics have gone hand in hand with major changes in the organization and technology of the press. It is the nature of politics, essentially a form of communication, to respond to changes in how communications are carried on. This can be seen by considering five important periods in journalistic history.

### The Party Press

In the early years of the Republic, politicians of various factions and parties created, sponsored, and controlled newspapers to further their interests. This was possible because circulation was of necessity small (newspapers could not easily be distributed to large audiences, owing to poor transportation) and newspapers were expensive (the type was set by hand and the presses printed copies slowly). Furthermore, there were few large advertisers to pay the bills. These newspapers circulated chiefly among the political and commercial elites who could afford the high subscription prices. Even with high prices, the newspapers often required subsidies that frequently came from the government or a political party.

During the Washington administration, the Federalists, led by Alexander Hamilton, created the *Gazette of the United States*. The Republicans, led by Thomas Jefferson, retaliated by creating the *National*

*Gazette* and made its editor, Philip Freneau, “clerk for foreign languages” in the State Department at \$250 a year (more than \$6,000 in today’s dollars) to help support him. After Jefferson became president, he induced another publisher, Samuel Harrison Smith, to start the *National Intelligencer*, subsidizing him by giving him a contract to print government documents. Andrew Jackson, when he became president, aided in the creation of *The Washington Globe*. By some estimates, there were more than 50 journalists on the government payroll during this era. Naturally, these newspapers were relentlessly partisan in their views. Citizens could choose among different party papers, but only rarely could they find a paper that presented both sides of an issue.

### The Popular Press

Changes in society and technology made possible the rise of a self-supporting, mass-readership daily newspaper. The development of the high-speed rotary press enabled publishers to print thousands of copies of a newspaper cheaply and quickly. The invention of the telegraph in the 1840s meant that news from Washington could be flashed almost immediately to New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Charleston, thus providing local papers with access to information that once only the Washington papers enjoyed. The creation in 1848 of the Associated Press allowed telegraphic dissemination of information to newspaper editors on a systematic basis. Since the AP provided stories that had to be brief and that went to newspapers of every political hue, it could not afford to be partisan or biased; to attract as many subscribers as possible, it had to present the facts objectively.

Meanwhile, the nation was becoming more urbanized, with large numbers of people brought together in densely settled areas. These people could support a daily newspaper by paying only a penny per copy and by patronizing merchants who advertised in its pages. Newspapers no longer needed political patronage to prosper, and soon such subsidies began to dry up. In 1860, the Government Printing Office was established, thereby putting an end to most of the printing contracts that Washington newspapers had once enjoyed.

The mass-readership newspaper was scarcely non-partisan, but the partisanship it displayed arose from the convictions of its publishers and editors rather than from the influence of its party sponsors. And these convictions blended political beliefs with economic interest. The way to attract a large readership was with sensationalism: violence, romance, and patriotism, coupled with exposés of government, politics, business, and society. As practiced by Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst, founders of large newspaper empires, this editorial policy

had great appeal for the average citizen and especially for the immigrants flooding into the large cities.

Strong-willed publishers could often become powerful political forces. Hearst used his papers to agitate for war with Spain when the Cubans rebelled against Spanish rule. Conservative Republican political leaders were opposed to the war, but a steady diet of newspaper stories about real and imagined Spanish brutalities whipped up public opinion in favor of intervention. At one point, Hearst sent noted artist Frederic Remington to Cuba to supply paintings of the conflict. Remington cabled back: “Everything is quiet. . . . There will be no war.” Hearst supposedly replied: “Please remain. You furnish the pictures and I’ll furnish the war.”<sup>5</sup> When the battleship USS *Maine* blew up in Havana harbor, President William McKinley felt helpless to resist popular pressure, and war was declared in 1898.

For all their excesses, the mass-readership newspapers began to create a common national culture, to establish the feasibility of a press free of government control or subsidy, and to demonstrate how exciting (and profitable) the criticism of public policy and the revelation of public scandal could be.

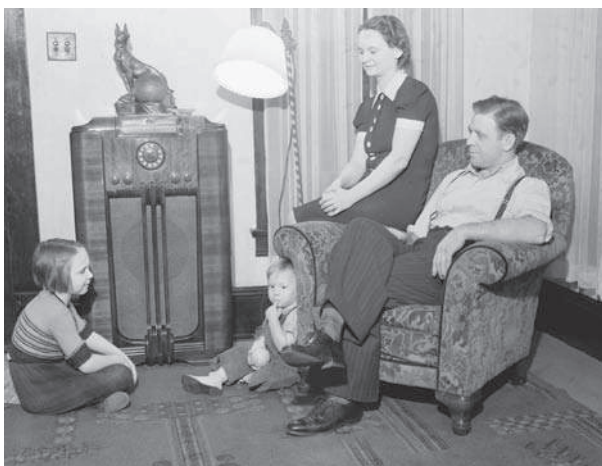
## Magazines of Opinion

The growing middle class often was repelled by what it called “yellow journalism” and was developing around the turn of the century a taste for political reform and a belief in the doctrines of the progressive movement. To satisfy this market, a variety of national magazines appeared that—unlike those devoted to manners and literature—discussed issues of public policy. Among the first of these were *The Nation*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and *Harper’s*, founded in the 1850s and 1860s; later came the more broadly based mass-circulation magazines

such as *McClure’s*, *Scribner’s*, and *Cosmopolitan*. They provided the means for developing a national constituency for certain issues such as regulating business (or in the language of the times, “trust-busting”), purifying municipal politics, and reforming the civil service system. Lincoln Steffens and other so-called muckrakers were frequent contributors to the magazines, setting a pattern for what we now call “investigative reporting.”

The national magazines of opinion provided an opportunity for individual writers to gain a nationwide following. The popular press, though initially under the heavy influence of founder-publishers, made the names of certain reporters and columnists household words. In time, the great circulation wars between the big-city daily newspapers started to wane, as the more successful papers bought up or otherwise eliminated their competition. This reduced the need for the more extreme forms of sensationalism, a change reinforced by the growing sophistication and education of America’s readers. And the founding publishers gradually were replaced by less flamboyant managers. All of these changes—in circulation needs, audience interests, managerial style, and the emergence of nationally known writers—helped increase the power of editors and reporters.

Though writers may have been identified with social causes during the muckraking era, they became less identified with political parties. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, overt partisanship in journalism largely faded away, as journalists and editors sought to be objective and neutral in their coverage of politics (we discuss later in the chapter if they actually live up to that ideal). The partisan press gradually was replaced by a more mainstream nonpartisan press.<sup>6</sup>



Bettman/Corbis



Pixelover RM 3/Alamy

*News used to come by radio, but today many people read news on iPads and other electronic devices.*



## Electronic Journalism

Radio came on the national scene in the 1920s, television in the late 1940s. They represented a major change in the way news was gathered and disseminated, though few politicians at first understood the importance of this change. A broadcast permits public officials to speak directly to audiences without their remarks being filtered through editors and reporters. This was obviously an advantage to politicians, provided they were skilled enough to use it; they could in theory reach the voters directly on a national scale without the services of political parties, interest groups, or friendly editors.

But there was an offsetting disadvantage—people could easily ignore a speech broadcast on a radio or television station, either by not listening at all or by tuning in to a different station. By contrast, the views of at least some public figures would receive prominent and often unavoidable display in newspapers, and in a growing number of cities there was only one daily paper. Moreover, space in a newspaper is cheap compared to time on a television broadcast.

Adding one more story, or one more name to an existing story, costs the newspaper little. By contrast, less news can be carried on radio or television, and each news segment must be quite brief to avoid boring the audience. As a result, the number of political personalities that can be covered by radio and television news is much smaller than is the case with newspapers, and the cost (to the station) of making a news item or broadcast longer often is prohibitively large.

Thus, to obtain the advantages of electronic media coverage, public officials must do something sufficiently bold or colorful to gain free access to radio and television news—or they must find the money to purchase radio and television time. The president of the United States, of course, is routinely covered by radio and television and can ordinarily get free time to speak to the nation on matters of importance. All other officials must struggle for media attention by making controversial statements, acquiring a national reputation, or purchasing expensive time.

Until the 1990s, the “big three” television networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC) together claimed 80 percent or more of all viewers. Their evening newscasts dominated electronic media coverage of politics and government affairs. When it came to presidential campaigns, for example, the three networks were the only television games in town—they reported on the primaries, broadcast the party conventions, and covered the general election campaigns, including any presidential debates. But over the last few decades, the networks’ evening newscasts have changed in ways that have made it harder for candidates to use them to get their messages across. For instance, the average **sound bite**—a video clip of a presidential contender

speaking—dropped from about 42 seconds in 1968 to less than 8 seconds by 2004.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the audience for these broadcasts has shrunk dramatically in recent decades: Since 1980, the audience for these programs has declined by more than half (from more than 50 million to just over 22.5 million viewers).<sup>8</sup>

Today, politicians have sources other than the network news for sustained and personalized television exposure. Politicians routinely appear on news magazines, the Sunday talk shows, early-morning television programs, late-night comedy programs, and cable news stations such as Fox News, MSNBC, or CNN. This does not even cover the vast variety of online venues where politicians can also seek to gain exposure to air their points of view. We discuss below what effect this might have on viewers and American government more broadly.

## The Internet

More than half of all Americans used the Internet to get political news about the 2010 midterm elections, a trend that has continued in subsequent elections.<sup>9</sup> The political news found there ranges from summaries of stories from newspapers and magazines to political rumors and hot gossip. For example, viewers may scan political ideas posted on a **blog**; many blogs specialize in offering liberal, conservative, or libertarian perspectives. The Internet is the ultimate free market in political news: No one can ban, control, or regulate it, and no one can keep facts, opinions, or nonsense off of it.

The rise of the Internet has completed a remarkable transformation in American journalism. In the days of the party press, only a few people read newspapers. When mass-circulation newspapers arose, mass politics also arose. When magazines of opinion developed, interest groups also developed. When radio and television became dominant, politicians could build their own bridges to voters without party or interest-group influence. And now, with the Internet, voters and political activists can talk to each other. This is true in democracies like the United States, but also in authoritarian regimes as well. For example, the ability for activists to communicate through sites like Twitter and Facebook was an important factor fueling the Arab Spring revolutions in 2011. It is becoming much harder for a powerful leader to control what other people can learn.

Of course, today it is not enough to just talk about “the Internet” as an undifferentiated collection of websites. Not only can voters read the news online or go to a campaign’s website, they can also follow politics via

**sound bite** A radio or video clip of someone speaking.

**blog** A series, or log, of discussion items on a page of the World Wide Web.

social media and on their smartphones. One recent study found that, among those who used the web, 48 percent say they got news about government and politics from Facebook in the past week. In this study, Facebook was tied with local news, and ranked ahead of both cable and broadcast news, as a source of information.<sup>10</sup> An increasing number of Americans also follow political figures on Twitter, Facebook, and other social media platforms, and more than one-quarter of Americans (and more than 40 percent of those under age 49) tracked politics on their cell phones during the 2014 elections.<sup>11</sup> Politicians, recognizing that this is an important way of reaching out to voters, now work to carefully craft their social media presence. For example, President Obama has a team of people who use social media outlets to promote the president's policies.<sup>12</sup> Politics, like most other activities in the 21st century, has entered the digital age.

But what have the effects of the Internet, Facebook, Twitter, and the like been? The evidence is somewhat more mixed than you might think. First, many had hoped that the Internet would let people get access to a wider range of political information than ever before. At some level, this is no doubt true: If you can write it down, you can post it online (a search of comment sections on many online articles will convince you that people can believe the most seemingly implausible theories). However, this democratizing impact has been quite muted in practice. Most people find political news online through major search engines or by visiting leading news sites (like Yahoo! News, Google News, or major news organizations like the *New York Times*' website). Many of the links shared on Facebook and other social media outlets are also to these dominant sites. While people can search out different or alternative voices online, most do not. As a result, online news largely looks like offline news, just in a different format.<sup>13</sup>

Second, many had hoped that the Internet would transform how much people know about politics, especially young people. But as you might suspect given what we said above, the effect has again been relatively modest. The Internet makes a world of political information available to you: If you love politics, you have never had access to more information about politics and public affairs than you do now. However, it has also never been easier to avoid politics if you want to as well, by searching for sports, entertainment news, or funny cat videos. After all, political web traffic makes up just a tiny slice of Internet traffic: About 3 percent of web traffic goes to news sites, and about 0.12 percent (that's twelve one-hundredths of one percent) goes to political sites.<sup>14</sup> As a result, the Internet has not led most people to become much better informed about politics.<sup>15</sup>

Third, many also had hoped that the Internet and social media campaigns would change political organization.

Here, there is stronger evidence that the Internet has changed politics in the way people had hoped. For example, grassroots organizing for many groups, especially on the political left, has been greatly aided by the Internet.<sup>16</sup> The most classic group is MoveOn.Org, which since its founding in 1998 has used online tools to organize for political causes, often generating significant offline activism. Other groups have used similar online techniques to facilitate organizing and mobilizing voters.

This electronic mobilization has also helped to increase voter participation and engagement, especially among young people. For example, in Chapter 8 we discussed how get-out-the-vote operations—especially in-person operations—can effectively boost turnout. But some groups are especially hard to reach through such in-person visits, especially young people, who are more likely to live in apartment buildings (where canvassers cannot gain entry) or have evening plans or jobs and so are not at home when canvassers knock on the door. Sending these voters text messages, however, can increase their voter turnout.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, many groups are turning to online tools to mobilize young people politically, often with positive success.<sup>18</sup> In short, the Internet may not have transformed what people know about politics, but it has changed political activism and activity.

## Covering Politicians

Over time, as the media environment has changed from a partisan press, to circulation-driven papers, to electronic outlets, to the Internet, so has how political actors interacted with the media. No office illustrates this more than the presidency. Initially, the president was rather remote and removed from the public eye, but no longer. Theodore Roosevelt was the first president to raise the systematic cultivation of the press to an art form. From the day he took office, he made it clear that he would give inside stories to friendly reporters and withhold them from hostile ones. He made sure that scarcely a day passed without his doing something newsworthy. In 1902, he built the West Wing of the White House and included in it, for the first time, a special room for reporters near his office, and he invited the press to view, and become fascinated by, the antics of his children. In return, the reporters adored him. Teddy's nephew Franklin Roosevelt institutionalized this system by making his press secretary (a job created by Herbert Hoover) a major instrument for cultivating and managing, as well as informing, the press.

Today, the press secretary heads a large staff that meets with reporters, briefs the president on questions he is likely to be asked, attempts to control the flow of news from cabinet departments to the press, and arranges briefings for out-of-town editors (to bypass



## HOW THINGS WORK

### How to Read the News

News articles don't simply report the news; they report somebody's idea of what is news, written in language intended to persuade as well as inform. To read a news article intelligently, look for three things: what is covered, who the sources are, and how language is used.

#### Coverage

Every major national news media outlet will cover a big story, such as a flood, fire, or presidential trip, but different media can pick and choose among lesser stories. One television network will select stories about the environment, business fraud, and civil rights, while a digital media publication may choose to publish stories about crime, drug dealers, and "welfare cheats." What do these choices tell you about the beliefs of the editors and reporters working for these news organizations? What do these people want you to believe are the important issues?

#### Sources

For some stories, the source is obvious: "The Supreme Court decided. . .," "Congress voted. . .," or "The president said. . .". For others, the source is not so obvious. There are two kinds of sources you should beware of. The first is an anonymous source. When you read phrases such as "a high-ranking official said today. . ." or "White House sources revealed that. . .," always ask yourself this question: Why does the source want me to know this? The answer usually will be this: Because if I believe what he or she said, it will advance his or her interests. This can

happen in one of three ways. First, the source may support a policy or appointment and want to test public reaction to it. This is called floating a **trial balloon**. Second, the source may oppose a policy or appointment and hope that by leaking word of it, the idea will be killed. Third, the source may want to take credit for something good that happened or shift blame onto somebody else for something bad that happened. When you read a story based on anonymous sources, ask yourself these questions: Judging from the tone of the story, is this leak designed to support or kill an idea? Is it designed to take credit or shift blame? In whose interest is it to accomplish these things? By asking these questions, you often can make a pretty good guess as to the identity of the anonymous source.

#### Language

Everybody uses words to persuade without actually making a clear argument. This is called using **loaded language**. For example, if you like a politician, call him "Senator Smith"; if you don't like him, refer to him as "right-wing (or left-wing) senators such as Smith." If you like an idea proposed by a professor, call her "respected"; if you don't like the idea, call her "controversial." If you favor abortion, call somebody who agrees with you "pro-choice" ("choice" is valued by most people); if you oppose abortion, call those who agree with you "pro-life" ("life," like "choice," is a good thing). Recognizing loaded language in a news article can give you important clues to the journalist's own point of view.

what many presidents think are the biases of the White House press corps).

All this effort is directed primarily at the White House press corps, a group of men and women who have a lounge in the White House where they wait for a story to break, attend the daily press briefing, or take advantage of a "photo op"—an opportunity to photograph the president with some newsworthy person.

No other nation in the world has brought the press into such close physical proximity to the head of its government. The result is that the actions of our government are personalized to a degree not found in most other democracies. Whether the president rides a horse, comes down with a cold, greets a Boy Scout, or takes a trip, the press is there.

Of course, the president and his advisors are not fools—they give this access because they understand

there are political benefits to the president to doing so. By giving reporters access to the president, he gets his name in the press, and gets to push his agenda. Indeed, as we will see in Chapter 14, the president can strategically use the media to appeal to public opinion to try and win support for his policies.

Other political actors in Washington, D.C., have learned the same lesson: cultivating the press can allow them to promulgate their messages. In every agency and cabinet department, in every House and Senate office,

**trial balloon** Information leaked to the media to test public reaction to a possible policy.

**loaded language** Words that imply a value judgment, used to persuade a reader without having made a serious argument.





Betmann/Corbis



Brendan Smialowski/AFP/Getty Images/Newscom

*In 1939, White House press conferences were informal affairs, as when reporters gathered around Franklin Roosevelt's desk in the Oval Office. Today, they are huge gatherings held in a special conference room, as shown on the right.*

there is staff trained to deal with the media. Even the Supreme Court—which famously bans cameras in its courtroom and works to present an image of itself as above politics—has a press office that works with the media to disseminate information about its rulings.

Members of Congress are classic exemplars of how to use the media to promulgate a message and increase one's visibility. The power of the media to help members of Congress was first shown in 1950. Estes Kefauver was a little-known senator from Tennessee. Then he chaired a Senate committee investigating organized crime. When these dramatic hearings were televised, Kefauver became a household name. In 1952, he ran for the Democratic nomination for president and won a lot of primary votes before losing to Adlai Stevenson.

Since then, members of Congress have realized that appearing in the media—especially on TV—can help them further their career. While television cameras were not permitted on the House and Senate floors until the late 1970s, today C-SPAN provides extensive coverage of both chambers. Even more importantly, members of Congress—especially those with presidential ambitions—seek to appear on the panoply of television news programs to increase their name recognition and profile.

The Internet further allows politicians to appeal to the public. Through social media, politicians seek to reach out to their constituents (as well as journalists) with their policy proposals. And of course, politicians try to carefully craft and control their images in the media without the interference of journalists. As we will see below, there is a tension between what politicians present to the press and what the press wants to cover. In short, politicians are not simply passive figures being covered by the media, they actively try to shape their media image.

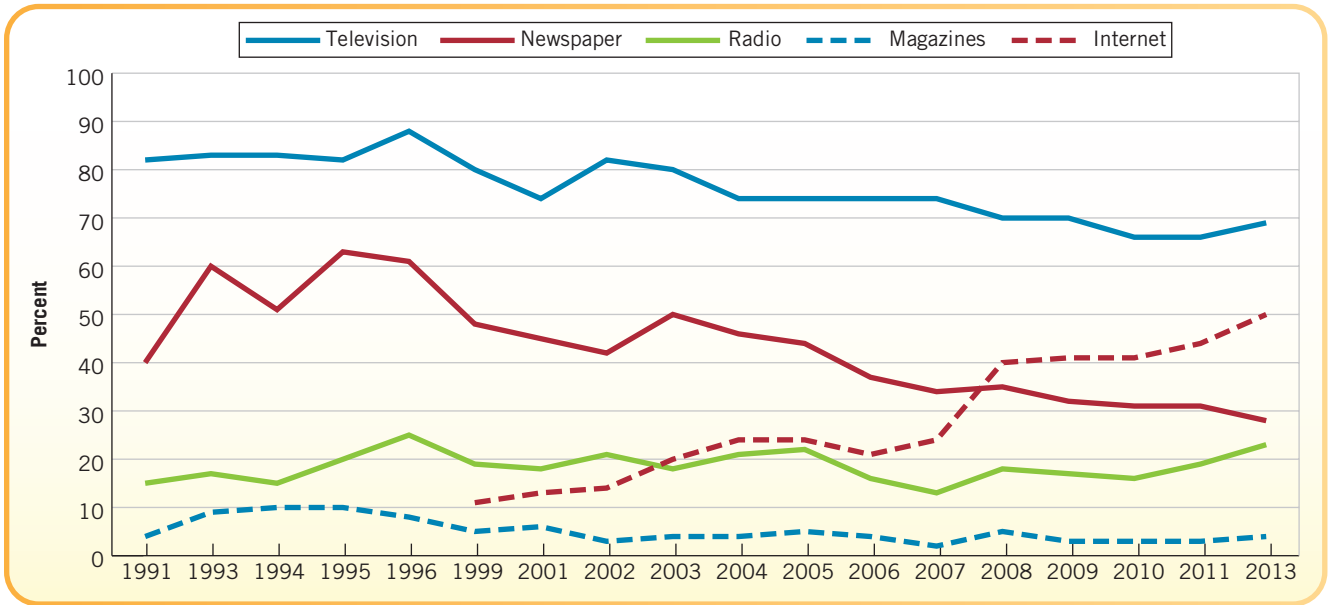
## 12-2 Where Do Americans Get Their News? Does This Matter?

Above, we suggested that more Americans are turning online to find political news. But more broadly, where do Americans get their news and information about politics? Do they surf the web, watch TV, read newspapers, or listen to the radio? And how has this pattern changed over time? Figure 12.1 uses data from the Pew Research Center to track where Americans get their news over time.

Over the past 25 years, television has been the dominant source of news for most Americans: At least two-thirds of Americans in every year report that TV is one of their most important sources of news. Most Americans turn to television (which would include local TV news, network TV news, and cable TV news) to learn about politics. However, the number doing so has fallen somewhat from the 1990s, where more than 80 percent of Americans primarily relied on television. What has taken the place of television? The Internet. Prior to 2000, the Internet was not a viable option for most Americans. But with the large-scale expansion of broadband connections (and the end of slow and unreliable dial-up modems), the Internet has increasingly become a key news source. Indeed, looking at the long-term trends, it seems plausible that one day the Internet will overtake television as the main source of political news.

Newspapers, which once trailed only television as a news source, are becoming a less important source of information for many Americans (though, as we explain below, they still have a critical role to play as journalistic watchdogs). As circulations and advertising revenues

**FIGURE 12.1** Over-Time Trends in News Sources

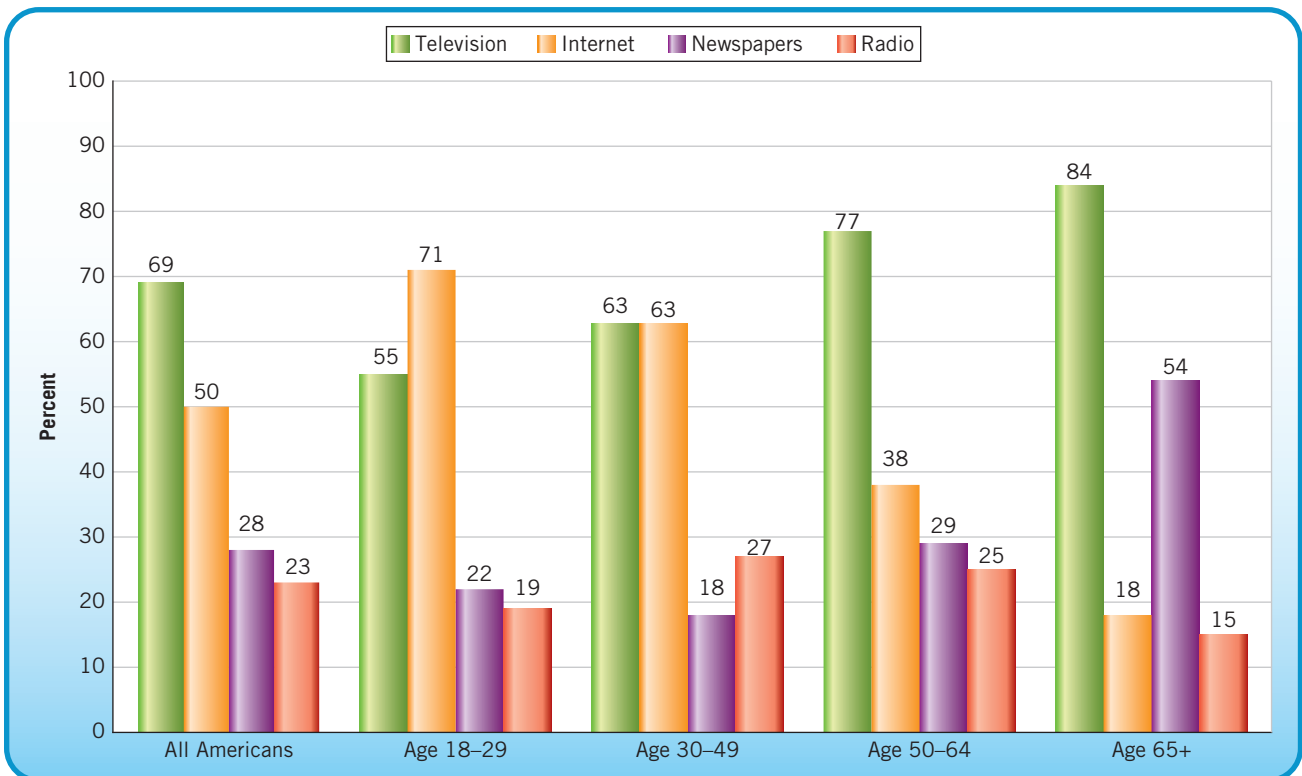


Source: Pew Research Center, “Amid Criticisms, Support for Media’s ‘Watchdog’ Role Stands Out,” August 2013.

decline, and more newspapers close, this trend is likely to continue. The other sources of news—radio and magazines—were never very popular in this time period, and have not really changed much over time.

These trends tell us what has happened to all Americans over time, but how do these patterns differ by age? Figure 12.2 shows the most recent year of data (2013) and breaks it down by age cohort.

**FIGURE 12.2** Americans’ Main Source for News



Source: Pew Research Center, “Amid Criticism, Support for Media’s ‘Watchdog’ Role Stands Out,” August 2013. Figures do not total to 100 percent because subjects could name two main sources of news.

These data echo the patterns seen above in Figure 12.1: Television is the dominant news source for most Americans, and the Internet is becoming a close second. But there is a striking age pattern that helps us to understand why the data in Figure 12.1 look the way it does. While television is the unquestioned champion of information sources for voters age 50 and older, it is much less so for younger voters. Indeed, for the youngest cohort, the Internet leads television by a wide margin (and the Internet and TV are equally important sources for those ages 30–49). Moving forward, it is likely that in the coming decades the Internet will be the dominant news source for all Americans, not just the young.

The age profile also helps us to understand the sharp decline of newspapers seen above. The only group still reading newspapers at a substantial level are those ages 65 and older, suggesting an even more dire picture of their health than the one given in Figure 12.1.

These figures illustrate that people get the news from a variety of different sources: television, the Internet, newspaper, and so forth. And within each one of those sources, there are now more choices than ever. Rather than just three main broadcast networks that dominated political coverage for much of the 20th century (ABC, CBS, and NBC), today there are hundreds of channels on cable, many of which cover news at least part of the time, and some of which (like Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC) cover it all of the time. Today, there is more information than ever, and people can choose which outlets they listen to. This increased choice raises three important questions. First, how has this changed how much Americans know about politics? Second, are people wrapped in informational echo chambers where they only hear one side of the issues? Third, can people get *local* political information? We take up these important questions in turn.

## Media Choice and Political Knowledge

First, consider how much people know about politics. As we discussed in Chapter 7, most people have relatively low levels of political knowledge. And as we discussed above, the Internet has not led most people to become more politically informed. But the Internet, along with cable TV, has had an important stratifying effect on the electorate. If you like politics, there is more political information today than ever before. But if you want to avoid politics, it has never been easier. As a result, some people know more about politics, but many now know less. This, it turns out, shapes who participates in politics.<sup>19</sup>

A generation ago, most Americans were incidentally exposed to political news and information. There were a limited number of TV channels, and if you wanted to watch television in the early evening hours, you had to watch the news (because every channel broadcast the

news then). Similarly, when the president came on television to give a prime-time address, you had to watch it if you wanted to watch TV—every network would have covered it.<sup>20</sup> This meant that most Americans got some news about politics. As a result, they were likely to participate in politics.

But today, far fewer Americans receive such incidental exposure. If you do not want to watch the news, you can flip to a cable channel and catch a rerun of *Modern Family*, a basketball game, a cooking show, a travel show, entertainment news, or any of the hundreds of other options available (or you can watch programming saved on your DVR or turn on Netflix). The same is true of presidential speeches, the State of the Union address, or even presidential debates. Those who do not like politics are less likely to be informed about it because there are so many other options available to them. Because they don't know the candidates and the issues, they are less likely to show up to the polls.<sup>21</sup> So increased media choice reduces some people's propensity to participate in politics.

So ironically, by giving people more choice, the Internet and cable TV have helped to lead some people to be *less* politically informed and engaged. There is no easy solution to this, as it is a by-product of modern technology. While we generally think of our array of modern entertainment choices to be a good thing, it can have some unintended negative consequences for politics.

## Do People Hear Both Sides of the Issues?

A generation ago, when most Americans got their news from either newspapers or broadcast television, it was clear they would get both sides of the political story. Most journalists strived to be objective and politically neutral (at least in theory), and they work to present both sides of the story. For example, if they do a story on, say, the Keystone XL pipeline, they will cover both supporters and opponents of the project. This ensured that most people heard both sides of the issue.

Even today, mainstream journalists in newspapers, television, and radio still try to achieve that value of objectivity. But many online bloggers, who are not journalists, feel no such qualms. Instead, they present only one side of the issue: the side with which they agree. Many blogs consciously identify with one party or the other, and present the news from a particular political point of view. Similarly, some cable news networks also slant the news in favor of one side or the other. Various studies have shown that Fox News generally leans right and favors Republicans, whereas MSNBC generally leans left and favors Democrats.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, many talk radio hosts like Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, or Randi Rhodes favor one side or the other.



With the return of such partisan outlets, there is a concern about **selective exposure**, where citizens can choose to hear only one side of the issue—their side of the issue. Do people consciously avoid opposing points of view? If so, this has important consequences for American politics. Hearing both sides of the issue is an important part of being a well-informed citizen, and knowing—and respecting—other people’s beliefs and values.

There is evidence that people do engage in some selective exposure. For example, of those who watch MSNBC, 48 percent call themselves liberals and only 18 percent call themselves conservatives. For Fox News, the figures are reversed (18 percent call themselves liberals vs. 46 percent who call themselves conservatives).<sup>23</sup> Similarly, blog readership tends to be highly segmented: those who read left-wing blogs don’t read right-wing blogs (and vice versa), and what blogs you read is related to your ideology.<sup>24</sup> This suggests that people do select particular media outlets that match their general political beliefs.

But at the same time, it is important to note that there are real, and significant, limits to selective exposure. Yes, it exists, but most Americans do not get most of their news from these sources. Instead, most Americans—both online and offline—tend to get most of their news from centrist, mainstream sources.<sup>25</sup> The audience for most blogs is tiny, and even the most popular programs on Fox News and MSNBC attract only a few million viewers per night in a nation of over 300 million Americans. Even if people watch Fox News, or read partisan blogs, they are also getting news from other sources as well. Even looking at social media sites, the evidence suggests that most Americans are exposed to balanced information from both sides of the political aisle.<sup>26</sup> In short, while most people have the option to select themselves into narrow “echo chambers,” the reality is that they do not.

## Can People Get Local News?

A generation ago, newspapers would have been second only to TV as a source of political information, while today, they trail both television and the Internet by a large amount (see Figure 12.1). This has a particular importance for how citizens learn about state and local politics. The vast variety of sources on television and the Internet ensures that citizens can—if they seek out that information—learn a great deal about *national* politics. Television, however, rarely gives much attention to state and local politics except when it is particularly salacious. Given its national scope, there simply is not enough time to cover politics in all 50 states, let alone the thousands of municipalities in the United States. Even during election season, very few gubernatorial or Senate races (and almost no House races) receive national TV attention, and

very little attention from major online sources. Local TV news gives little coverage to state and local politics, and even during election season, their coverage is largely superficial (reporting on poll results rather than substantive issues).<sup>27</sup> If you want to learn about state and local politics and campaigns, you largely need to do so through a newspaper.

Unfortunately, local newspapers are in decline, both due to declining circulation (see Figure 12.1) and declines in advertising revenue. The number of newspapers in the United States has shrunk by almost 20 percent in the past 25 years, and almost half of that loss has come since 2007.<sup>28</sup> A number of large cities—such as New Orleans and Birmingham—no longer have a daily print newspaper (and many other notable papers have also closed). Even where newspapers have remained in business, layoffs have been plentiful and journalistic budgets have shrunk. For example, the number of reporters devoted to covering state politics has declined by 35 percent since 2004.<sup>29</sup> While some have suggested using online sources to replace local newspapers, so far, this has not worked.<sup>30</sup>

As we explore later, the decline of local news sources has implications for the press’s role as a political watchdog. But it also has other consequences as well. Local newspapers are vital to promoting political engagement, especially in state and local politics. In places where a local paper has closed, citizens know less about the issues and are less politically active.<sup>31</sup> This suggests that the substitution of the Internet for newspapers seen in Figure 12.1 does matter politically. So far, Internet news sources have not provided the same depth of coverage, especially of subnational politics, as newspapers, and, as a result, it changes how citizens participate. Whether this pattern changes in the future remains to be seen.

### **selective exposure**

Consuming only those news stories with which one already agrees.



While newspapers have long been an important source for news, fewer Americans read them today than in the past.

**agenda-setting**

**(gatekeeping)** The ability of the news media, by printing stories about some topics and not others, to shape the public agenda.

**priming** The ability of the news media to influence the factors individuals use to evaluate political elites.

## 12-3 Media Effects

So far, we have seen how the media developed over time in American politics, and how Americans consume news (and some of the consequences of that consumption). But what, exactly, does

the media do in politics? How do the media affect politics? At the broadest level, the media serves to inform the public about politics and public affairs. While this entails many components, three in particular are noteworthy. First, the mass media helps to set the political agenda—that is, it shapes what people think about. Second, it frames political issues and influences how people understand them. Finally, it helps serve as a watchdog to guard against corruption and hold politicians accountable.

### Setting the Public Agenda

One vital role of the media is to help set the agenda. In any given day, far more happens than any given paper or news outlet could report. Part of the job of journalists is to decide what stories are important enough to report. This process is known as **agenda-setting** or **gatekeeping**. By covering some issues, but not others, the mass media shapes the issues that are being discussed at any given point in time.<sup>32</sup>

How do journalists decide which stories to cover? That is not easy to answer, as journalists use a variety of different criteria to select them. But many of the stories that they report on include familiar people, focus on conflict or scandal, and are timely.<sup>33</sup> This helps to explain why political stories often attract a great deal of attention, as they feature all of those characteristics.

Some people argue that the mass media can manipulate the agenda, and cause individuals to care about problems that are not especially important. This can happen, but it is relatively uncommon. More typically, the mass media's attention to problems is largely dictated by important real-world events. For example, when the government foils a terrorist plot, there are a large number of stories about it in the news, and people become more concerned about terrorism. Likewise, as California entered a record drought in recent years, the story received more coverage in the news, and voters viewed it as a more important problem. The media do set the agenda, but that agenda is heavily influenced by what is happening in the real world.

Some people read about theories like agenda-setting and assume that scholars think ordinary people are just the pawns of a powerful media: If the media tells people that issue X is important, then they think it's important. This somewhat cynical view, however, is too simplistic. Rather, ordinary people are making a more subtle judgment. They assume that if the mass media is talking about a story, then it must be important (otherwise, the media would talk about something else).<sup>34</sup> People use the media's discussion of a topic as a cue that said topic is important. Agenda-setting reflects engagement with the news more than blind obedience to the media.

Not only does the media help to set the political agenda, they also influence which issues the public uses to assess its political leaders. This process is known as **priming**. The basic logic of priming is an extension of agenda-setting. When the mass media covers an issue, viewers assume it is important. As a result, they rely on that issue more heavily when evaluating political elites.<sup>35</sup> For example, imagine you are trying to decide whether or not you approve of the job President Obama is doing in office. To do that, you would think about how well the president has handled all of the various issues he faces. But what issues will you consider and weigh most heavily? You will be most likely to consider the issues that have been covered in the news. For example, if the economy has been doing poorly and there have been more stories on the economy lately, you will weigh Obama's handling of the economy more heavily. That is the idea of priming: By the media covering a story, citizens use that issue to judge politicians.

We saw a potent example of priming during the George W. Bush presidency. Prior to 9/11, approval of President Bush was closely tied to perceptions of how well Bush was handling the economy: those who approved (disapproved) of Bush's handling of the economy tended to approve (disapprove) of Bush overall. But after the 9/11 attacks—and the ensuing spike in media attention to terrorism—evaluations of how well Bush handled terrorism became much more important. Similarly, after the 2008 financial crisis, evaluations of the president were much more closely tied to evaluations of his handling of the economy.<sup>36</sup>

Much as with agenda-setting, the point of priming is not to suggest that voters are fools led by the media. Rather, viewers use the media's coverage of an issue to infer that it is important (and hence should be the basis of political judgments). In fact, it is the more informed viewers who are most susceptible to priming effects.<sup>37</sup> More informed viewers are the ones who understand how to take what they learned in the media reports and apply it to evaluating a particular politician. Priming is not a

consequence of voter ignorance, rather, it comes from voter knowledge.

## Framing

**Framing** refers to the way in which the media presents a particular story. By presenting some aspects of an issue and ignoring others, the media influences how people think about that issue.<sup>38</sup> For example, suppose you are undecided about whether or not the U.S. should expand domestic production of oil and natural gas. If you watched one news report that emphasized the large number of high-paying jobs that would be created, you might be more likely to support more oil and gas production. In contrast, if you instead saw a report suggesting more drilling for oil and gas would seriously damage the environment, you might be more strongly opposed to it. The way in which the media frames the issue—as one of job creation versus environmental damage—shapes your opinion.

This makes framing a particularly important type of media effect—by influencing the way people understand an issue, framing shapes people’s attitudes. Framing is a key way the media works to change attitudes. But in most cases, framing effects are more modest than massive. Why? Because typically, media outlets present both sides of the story (remember the journalistic norms of balance discussed earlier). So in our example of oil drilling, they would present both the increased jobs and the risk to the environment at the same time. As a result, the frames partially wash each other out, and the overall effect is rather modest. Most people end up close to where they would be without the frame.<sup>39</sup>

But framing need not be so innocuous. In particular, there are some cases where the media presents a lopsided frame that favors one side of the issue, and here, there can be larger, and more pernicious, effects. For example, few issues have received more media coverage since 9/11 than the fight against terrorism, particularly how to balance the need for security with Americans’ civil liberties. This tension became especially acute in 2013, after Edward Snowden leaked classified documents detailing extensive domestic surveillance programs conducted by the National Security Agency. A large-scale analysis of media coverage of this issue finds that the frames used lead to greater support for government surveillance. Many stories about these programs stress the successes of the programs, and indicate that they have helped to keep Americans safe. Fewer stories offer a more critical take and focus more on the cases where civil liberties have been harmed. As a result, Americans tend to support expansive government surveillance.<sup>40</sup>

Similarly, the way in which the mass media reports on public assistance programs also weakens support for them. Media reports on these programs discuss waste and fraud in the system, and focus on individuals who abuse such programs. Such abuses are less common, however, than one would suspect from many media reports. But because the media report on the abuses in these programs (consistent with its watchdog role), people suspect waste, fraud, and abuse are widespread. The mass media frame for welfare programs, then, shapes and limits public support for them.<sup>41</sup>

The point of these examples is not to suggest that there are no legitimate security threats that justify surveillance, or that there is no abuse of public assistance programs. Obviously, there needs to be some surveillance to protect against terrorism, and there is fraud in public assistance programs. But the problem in both cases is that the media is only giving us part of the story—they are privileging one frame over another. We need to hear both sides of the story to make an informed decision. We wanted to hear about both the economic gains and the environmental risk of more drilling to make an informed decision, and these other cases are no different. When you hear news stories discussing particular issues, think carefully about what is being presented, and equally important, what is not.

**framing** The way in which the news media, by focusing on some aspects of an issue, shapes how people view that issue.

**watchdog** The press’s role as an overseer of government officials to ensure they act in the public interest.

## The Media as Watchdog: Political Accountability

Another core function for the media is to serve as a **watchdog** to guard against fraud and abuse, and to hold politicians to account for their campaign promises. Americans see this as a vital role for the media. While they are critical of the media in many respects (especially with respect to question of bias), more than two-thirds of Americans think the media keeps leaders from doing things that should not be done.<sup>42</sup> As we discussed above, the idea of the journalist as watchdog has a long history in American politics, and continues to be important today.

One of the most critical parts of this task is to fight against corruption in government. As we discussed in Chapter 11, there is not much evidence that interest groups “buy” policy through campaign donations. However, there is always a concern that politicians will



**game frame** The tendency of media to focus on political polls and strategy rather than on the issues.

**horse-race (scorekeeper) journalism** News coverage that focuses on who is ahead rather than on the issues.

Blagojevich in 2011. One study of corruption found that corruption was the least likely in states and localities with a vigorous press, especially investigative journalism.<sup>43</sup> The rationale is relatively straightforward: With more (and better) investigative journalists, it is more likely that politicians will be caught when they engage in misconduct. While the press presence is obviously not the only factor, it does suggest that the press serves as a critical watchdog.

The press also helps to ensure that politicians respond to public opinion. Several studies have found that when newspapers report more frequently on their local members of Congress, members are more likely to follow their constituent's wishes on legislative votes.<sup>44</sup> When the media reports on what politicians are doing in office, voters have more information about politicians' decisions. This makes it easier for voters to hold politicians accountable for their decisions, and hence politicians respond accordingly. Press coverage of politics helps to promote political accountability.

Of course, the challenge to this finding is that local newspapers are in decline. Local television news gives scant attention to members of Congress, and national papers and television do not have the space or time to cover individual members, so it is unclear whether online venues will have the resources to investigate members' records in this way. Whether this important watchdog function continues into the future is unclear.

## Can the Media Lead Us Astray?

The functions of the mass media we discussed above—setting the public agenda, framing issues, and serving as a watchdog—suggest a (relatively) positive role for the media. But the ways in which the media covers some issues can also lead us astray in some instances. In this section, we discuss several different ways in which media coverage can mislead and distort the truth. We do this to help readers become more informed consumers of the news media.

### Political Campaigns as a Political Game

In Chapter 10, we explained how the media contributes to helping inform citizens about the candidates and

be tempted to enter into corrupt deals, trading their political power for personal financial gain. For example, in 2014, former Virginia governor Bob McDonnell was convicted of corruption, as was former Illinois governor Rod

Blagojevich in 2011. One study of corruption found that corruption was the least likely in states and localities with a vigorous press, especially investigative journalism.<sup>43</sup> The rationale is relatively straightforward: With more (and better) investigative journalists, it is more likely that politicians will be caught when they engage in misconduct. While the press presence is obviously not the only factor, it does suggest that the press serves as a critical watchdog.

issues in elections. To the extent that the media report on the substantive issues of the day, the public becomes better informed. And generally speaking, as a result of such coverage, the public does learn about the issues of the day through the media. But there is one dimension of campaign reporting that is more harmful than helpful: a focus on elections as a political game. This “**game frame**” for political reporting has two elements. First, there is a focus on where the candidates' stand in the polls: who is up, and who is down? This type of poll-based coverage is known as **horse-race (or scorekeeper) journalism**. Second, there's a focus on tactics and strategy rather than substance: why did candidate X say Y? What does the trailing candidate need to do to get ahead? Together, they suggest to voters that style and strategy—not substance—decides elections.

Coverage of polls in elections is nothing new, and even predates the birth of modern public opinion polling. But over time, especially in the last few decades, stories about polls—and politicians' efforts to get ahead in the polls—have become strikingly more common. Over time, there has been less reporting on the substantive issues in elections.<sup>45</sup> In its place, journalists have substituted reports on the horse race and candidate strategy.<sup>46</sup>

Such stories tended to dominate the coverage in the 2012 election. According to the Pew Research Center, during the Republican primary, 64 percent of stories focused on strategy (including discussing polls), whereas only 10 percent of stories focused on the substantive issues during the campaign.<sup>47</sup> In the general election, the figures are closer, but strategy coverage still greatly outpaces policy discussions by a margin of two-to-one (44 percent vs. 22 percent, respectively).<sup>48</sup> For example, instead of simply discussing Mitt Romney's issue positions, many outlets discussed disorganization and disension among his campaign staff.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, instead of simply reporting that Obama changed his position on gay marriage in 2012, many outlets spent more time speculating why (political calculation? genuine conversion? family influence?).<sup>50</sup> Such stories have dubious informational value for voters, but they are staples of political coverage.

Why do journalists devote so much time and attention to these types of stories? They do so for three main reasons. First, readers like them. Reading about strategy and such is exciting, and suggests to readers that they're getting the “real scoop” behind the campaigns. Why understand what a candidate said when you can understand *why* he or she said it? Furthermore, most readers find substantive reporting rather dull. If you doubt this, sit down and read the candidates' position papers on various issues (you'll likely find it rather soporific). Unsurprisingly, given the choice, most voters opt for the horserace and strategy coverage over detailed issue-focused coverage.<sup>51</sup>

Second, reporting on strategy—especially polling—is relatively easy, so it simplifies journalists’ task in an era of shrinking resources. A poll result has a clear message, and does not require in-depth reporting the way a detailed piece on candidates’ substantive positions would.<sup>52</sup>

Finally, this sort of coverage reflects the press’s desire to be seen as independent of political elites. Because politicians carefully control their substantive message, reporters do not want to simply report on that, as it would make them seem like patsies being duped by politicians. Instead, they want to uncover the “real” story about why a candidate does what he does, so they write stories about candidates’ strategies and motives.<sup>53</sup>

Such coverage matters because it tends to make ordinary citizens more cynical about the political process.<sup>54</sup> It’s not hard to see why: by promoting the idea that elections (and politics more generally) is all about strategy and tactics—and not substance—the media make politics out to be just another game. This focus makes ordinary people think elections are not about the major issues. As we discussed in Chapter 10, major issues—especially the health of the economy—are really the driver of the election, even if that message does not always come through in the media.

Luckily, there is a simple solution to combatting these sorts of effects. When you see the media discussing strategy and tactics, just ignore it. When you see the media obsessing over polling data, remember the lesson from Chapter 10 that the daily fluctuation in the polls reflects noise more than true movement. Instead, seek out substantive coverage and focus there. It might be less entertaining, but it is far more helpful for casting an informed ballot.

## Sensationalism and Negativity

The media also tends to focus on the negative in stories, rather than on the positive. This fits with the media’s understanding of itself as a “watchdog,” and the ensuing belief that they should be on the lookout for corruption and scandal. Furthermore, such stories attract more attention: finding evidence of fraud and abuse is more newsworthy than finding that government programs function effectively.

Such patterns are true of the media generally,<sup>55</sup> but this tendency has become especially pronounced in reporting on recent elections. For example, in 2012, there were about twice as many negative stories as positive ones about both Romney and Obama.<sup>56</sup> Media reports emphasize the flaws and limitations of both candidates and their policies.

Another example of this bias toward negativity is how journalists report on campaign promises. Overall, politicians, once in office, generally *do* try and enact their campaign promises. Indeed, they often enact the vast majority

of them, at least in part.<sup>57</sup> Why then do most voters think that politicians frequently break their promises? Part of the explanation is that the media—in keeping with its watchdog role—focuses on the cases where politicians break them.

More generally, focusing on waste, fraud, and abuse—and any area where government is not performing effectively—helps to expose corruption and abuse (as we saw above), but it also makes citizens more negative and cynical about government.<sup>58</sup> In short, if citizens hear stories suggesting that government is not functioning effectively, they take them to heart. While trying to root out waste, fraud, and abuse is generally a good thing, too much focus here can turn off voters and make them cynical about the process.

Similarly, sensationalistic stories—ones that focus on salacious topics such as sex, drugs, or public health scares—also are overreported in the mass media. The level of coverage of these stories is grossly out of proportion to their importance to the general public. For example, in 2003, the media published more than 100,000 news articles discussing SARS and bioterrorism, while both combined killed fewer than 12 people. In contrast, smoking and physical inactivity—which killed millions—received little attention.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, the media went into a frenzy in the fall of 2014 discussing the threat of Ebola, while the risk to most Americans was extremely small. Stories about politicians’ sex lives are similarly frequently discussed ad nauseam—see, for example, Anthony Weiner, Larry Craig, and most famous of all, Bill Clinton.

The media focus on such stories because they attract viewers and readers.<sup>60</sup> The fact that there are so many more news outlets now only increases the pressure to publish salacious stories. There are no longer just the three major broadcast networks (NBC, CBS,



*The media extensively covered the Ebola outbreak in 2014, which is an example of sensationalism.*

and ABC) that broadcast politics, but several cable news channels, dozens of talk radio stations, and thousands of websites. Given this intense competition for viewers, each program has a big incentive to air salacious stories to attract viewers. While voters like these stories, they do little to inform the public. When you see the media covering a sensationalistic or salacious topic, ask yourself how relevant it actually is to becoming a better-informed citizen.

After reading this section on the ways in which media can lead one astray, you might think that you can never trust the media, but that is not correct. We wrote this section not to make you cynical about the media, but rather to help point out some ways in which the media can distort your understanding of politics. Become a skeptical news consumer, but not a cynical one.

### Are There Limits to Media Power?

After reading this section, you might think the media are quite powerful: they can shape the agenda, frame issues to influence opinions, and make viewers cynical with their focus on strategy and negativity. All of these effects are real, but it is important to understand that there is a very important limit to the media's effect on attitudes: people's experiences in everyday life.

In general, the media is most powerful when people know the least about an issue. As people know more and more about an issue, the media's effect is smaller.<sup>61</sup> We discussed this phenomenon in Chapter 10. Early in the primary season, when voters do not know the candidates, the media's portrayal of them has a big effect. After all, the public is just being introduced to the candidates, so the media's depiction of them matters a great deal. But over the course of the campaign, as voters learn more about the candidates, how the media depicts them matters less because there is less room for the media to influence their attitudes.

The same pattern is true of issues more generally. For example, the media typically have less ability to move people on issues where they have more personal experience, such as the economy. If you see many of your neighbors lose their jobs—or if you lose your own—you do not need the media to tell you that the economy is struggling. By contrast, most people have less direct experience with ISIS, Ebola, or America's role in Afghanistan. On these sorts of issues more removed from their everyday lives, the media have a larger effect on attitudes.

Furthermore, in many situations, the media are constrained by elites. This might seem odd—we have just discussed ways, such as serving as a watchdog, that the media can act as a check on elites and prevent them from abusing power. This is certainly true. But in many cases, the media are also dependent on

information from elites. For example, on foreign policy and terrorism, the media often cannot gather information on its own. Because of issues of national security, the government restricts what reporters can know, and information is leaked—typically strategically, as we will see below—by people who are trying to advance a particular political position. Likewise, on technical or complex scientific issues such as Internet security, nuclear power, or global warming, the media typically depends on elites to explain and clarify the issues at hand. As a result, much of the time, media reports reflect the elite debate—that is, elites set the terms of the debate, and the media just pass along that debate to the mass public.<sup>62</sup> In short, while the media are powerful, they are often constrained in their ability to shape public opinion and public policy.

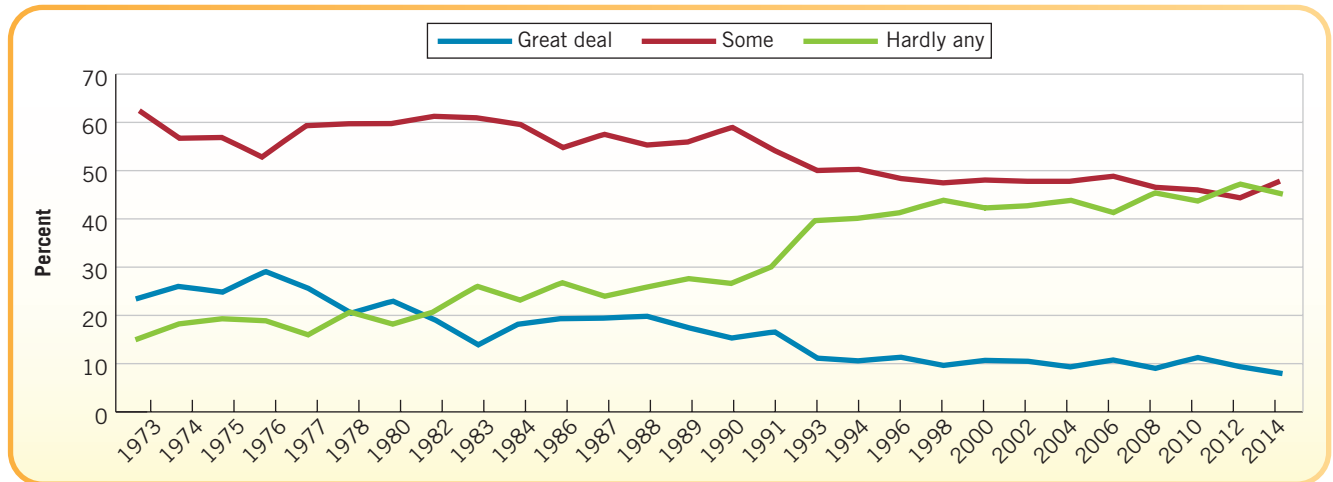
## 12-4 Is the Media Trustworthy and Unbiased?

Do Americans have confidence in the press? Do they think they can reliably depend on the press to get the information they need to be informed about politics and public affairs? Since the early 1970s, political scientists have been asking survey questions to gauge how much confidence individual citizens have in the press. We present these data in Figure 12.3.

The data are clear: Over time, Americans have become less confident in the press. In 1973 (the first year this question was asked), 23 percent of respondents had a great deal of confidence in the press, 62 percent had some confidence in the press, and 15 percent had hardly any confidence in the press. In 2014 (the most recent year), respondents were far less confident in the press. Now only 8 percent have a great deal of confidence, 48 percent have some confidence, and 45 percent have hardly any confidence. Since the 1970s, the number of people with a great deal of confidence in the press has declined sharply, and the number with no confidence has risen sharply (and there has been a similar, albeit less steep, decline in those with some confidence in the press). In short, Americans trust the press less today than they did 40 years ago.

While the data in Figure 12.3 are the best over-time data we have available, other data show the same pattern of declining confidence in trust in the media. For example, the Gallup Organization has been asking about trust in the media since the 1970s as well, and finds that media trust is at an all-time low in recent years.<sup>63</sup> Likewise, recent data from the Pew Research Center finds that 39 percent of Americans think they cannot trust the information they get from national news organizations.<sup>64</sup> No matter what data you use, it seems that Americans do not trust the press very much.



**FIGURE 12.3** Confidence in the Press, 1973–2014

**Source:** Author's analysis of the General Social Survey, 1973–2014

But why do Americans distrust the media? Why do they think they cannot be trusted? Part of the reason is undoubtedly the sorts of issues we discussed in the previous section: the emphasis on strategy and polls in election coverage, negativity, and so forth. But politicians are also partly to blame for the decline in news media trust. Democratic and Republican politicians alike criticize the press and attack it as biased and unfair. When they do that, it makes ordinary voters think that the press is biased and unfair, and hence, Americans trust the media less.<sup>65</sup>

We get to whether the media is actually biased next, but this suggests that by labeling the media as biased, politicians decrease trust in the media. But there is another lesson here in how to be an informed consumer of the news. Remember that whenever a politician accuses the media of bias, he or she typically has an incentive to do so. Take that fact into account as you decide for yourself whether or not the media is actually biased in that particular instance.

### Is the Media Biased?

Above, we saw that Americans do not trust the media. Is this because it is actually biased? Most Americans certainly *think* that the media is biased. In a recent study from the Pew Research Center, only 26 percent of Americans thought the press gets its facts straight, only 20 percent thought it was pretty independent, and only 19 percent thought it was fair to all sides.<sup>66</sup> But are Americans' beliefs accurate? The answer, as we will see in this section, is subtler and less obvious than you probably think.

In any discussion of media bias, one of the first facts that most people mention is that journalists tend to be overwhelmingly liberal and Democratic. Many studies, dating back to the early 1980s, have concluded that members of the national press are more liberal than the average citizen.<sup>67</sup>

The public certainly believes that members of the media are liberals. A Gallup Poll done in 2014 found that 44 percent of Americans believe the media are “too liberal,” versus only 19 percent who thought they were “too conservative.”<sup>68</sup> In another study, even Democrats agreed with this view. A survey taken just a few weeks before the 2008 presidential election found that more than two-thirds of voters believed that the media favored Barack Obama over John McCain.<sup>69</sup>

While most journalists are liberals, not all are, especially in recent years with the rise of conservative hosts on talk radio (like Rush Limbaugh or Sean Hannity), on Fox News, and in newspapers like the *Washington Times*. That said, by all accounts, it seems like most journalists do favor Democrats.

The liberal and Democratic bent of journalists, however, is not in and of itself enough evidence to conclude that the media are biased. While journalists are typically liberal, they are also committed to journalistic norms of objectivity and balance, which will counteract their personal biases.<sup>70</sup>

The best way to study media bias is to look at detailed content analyses of the media's coverage of politicians



Stephen Colbert interviews President Obama on his television show.



## POLICY DYNAMICS: INSIDE/OUTSIDE THE BOX

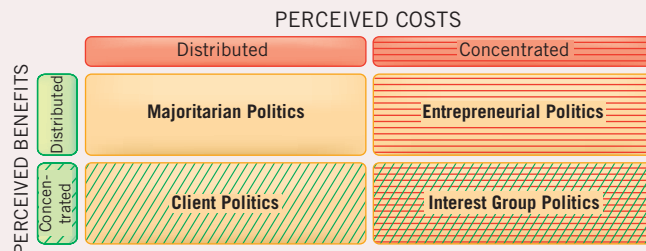
### Global Warming: Majoritarian Politics and the Media

In recent years, there is a growing scientific consensus that human activity is contributing to global climate change (see, e.g., the report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change). Humans produce greenhouse gases, predominantly carbon dioxide, that alter the Earth's atmosphere and generate climate change. As a result, there has been a debate in the United States, as in many other countries, about policies to reduce or reverse such emissions.

Efforts to address limiting greenhouse gas emissions are best seen as majoritarian politics. The benefits of reduced emissions—a cleaner environment—are widely dispersed to all Americans (and indeed, all citizens all over the globe). Similarly, the costs would be borne by all Americans as well: According to the EPA, more than two-thirds of carbon dioxide emissions come from electricity generation and transportation, which all Americans use.

A large part of the debate in the United States, however, has centered on whether or not the scientific consensus about global warming is correct. The majoritarian debate has not been over what policy to pursue, but whether any policy at all is needed. There are many reasons why this debate takes this form in the United States, but part of the reason is how the mass media covers the issue of climate change. While climate scientists almost all agree that

human activity contributes to global warming (via greenhouse gases), the mass media portrays this as a debate, rather than an area of scientific consensus. As a result, Americans are less likely to understand the degree of scientific consensus on this issue. Because the issue is framed as having two sides, Americans believe that, though nearly all climate scientists see this as a settled issue. So the media coverage of global warming (among other factors) contributes to the unique politics of this issue.



**Source:** Ariel Malka et al., “Featuring Skeptics in News Media Stories about Global Warming Reduces Public Beliefs in the Seriousness of Global Warming” (Unpublished manuscript, Stanford University, June 2009); Maxwell Boykoff and Jules Boykoff, “Balance as Bias: Global Warming and the U.S. Prestige Press,” *Global Environmental Change* 14 (2004).

to determine if there is any bias in favor of one party or another. There are some studies that find evidence of a liberal, pro-Democratic bias in the media. The best of these is the work by Professor Tim Groseclose, who does identify examples of pro-Democratic media slant on some issues.<sup>71</sup> However, many more studies have been conducted that find that overall, media coverage is not biased in favor of one party or another. Scholars have come to this conclusion studying patterns of coverage in campaigns,<sup>72</sup> as well as coverage of politicians outside of campaigns.<sup>73</sup> Studies find that, if anything, media outlets tend to favor incumbents, regardless of party. News outlets (especially newspapers) that endorse candidates are much more likely to endorse the incumbent,<sup>74</sup> and endorsed candidates receive more positive coverage in those outlets (and in turn are better liked by voters).<sup>75</sup> In general, then, there does not seem to be much overall evidence in favor of the media slanting in favor of one party or the other.

This overall lack of clear bias stems not just from journalistic norms of balance and objectivity, but also from economics. Media outlets need to attract viewers and advertisers to stay in business. If media outlets are too biased or slanted, they will lose audience share.<sup>76</sup>

Given that most Americans are relatively centrist (see Chapter 7), mainstream outlets want to cater to the typical American. If these outlets lose viewers, they will be less attractive to advertisers, who want to reach as many people as possible.<sup>77</sup> Given this, it makes economic sense for most outlets to be relatively politically balanced.

## 12-5 Government Regulation of the Media

Ironically, the least competitive media outlets—newspapers—are almost entirely free from government regulation, while the most competitive ones—radio and television stations—must have a government license to operate and must adhere to a variety of government regulations. And the Internet has effectively no content regulations at all.

Newspapers and magazines need no license to publish, their freedom to publish may not be restrained in advance, and they are liable for punishment for what they do publish only under certain highly restricted circumstances. The First Amendment has been interpreted as meaning that no government, federal or state, can place “prior restraints”

(i.e., censorship) on the press except under very narrowly defined circumstances.<sup>78</sup> When the federal government sought to prevent the *New York Times* from publishing the Pentagon Papers, a set of secret government documents stolen by an antiwar activist, the Supreme Court held that the paper was free to publish them.<sup>79</sup>

Once something is published, a newspaper or magazine may be sued or prosecuted if the material is libelous or obscene or if it incites someone to commit an illegal act. But these usually are not very serious restrictions because the courts have defined *libelous*, *obscene*, and *incitement* so narrowly as to make it more difficult here than in any other nation to find the press guilty of such conduct. For example, for a paper to be found guilty of libeling a public official or other prominent person, the person must not only show that what was printed was wrong and damaging but must also show, with “clear and convincing evidence,” that it was printed maliciously—that is, with “reckless disregard” for its truth or falsity.<sup>80</sup> When in 1984 Israeli General Ariel Sharon sued *Time* magazine for libel, the jury decided the story *Time* printed was false and defamatory but that *Time* had not published it as the result of malice, and so Sharon did not collect any damages.

There are also laws intended to protect the privacy of citizens, but they do not really inhibit newspapers. In general, your name and picture can be printed without your consent if they are part of a news story of some conceivable public interest. And if a paper attacks you in print, the paper has no legal obligation to give you space for a reply.<sup>81</sup>

It is illegal to use printed words to advocate the violent overthrow of the government if by your advocacy you incite others to action, but this rule has only rarely been applied to newspapers.<sup>82</sup>

## Confidentiality of Sources

Reporters believe they should have the right to keep confidential the sources of their stories. Some states agree and have passed laws to that effect. Most states and the federal government do not agree, so the courts must decide in each case whether the need of a journalist to protect confidential sources does or does not outweigh the interest of the government in gathering evidence in a criminal investigation. In general, the Supreme Court has upheld the right of the government to compel reporters to divulge information as part of a properly conducted criminal investigation, if it bears on the commission of a crime.<sup>83</sup>

This conflict arises not only between reporters and law enforcement agencies but also between reporters and persons accused of committing a crime. Myron Farber, a reporter for the *New York Times*, wrote a series of stories that led to the indictment and trial of a physician on charges he had murdered five patients. The judge ordered Farber to show him his notes to determine whether they should be given to the defense lawyers.

Farber refused, arguing that revealing his notes would infringe upon the confidentiality he had promised to his sources. Farber was sent to jail for contempt of court. On appeal, the New Jersey Supreme Court and the U.S. Supreme Court decided against Farber, holding that the accused person’s right to a fair trial includes the right to compel the production of evidence, even from reporters.

In another case, the Supreme Court upheld the right of the police to search newspaper offices, so long as they have a warrant. But Congress then passed a law forbidding such searches (except in special cases), requiring instead that the police subpoena the desired documents.<sup>84</sup>

In 2005, two reporters were sentenced to jail when they refused to give prosecutors information about who in the Bush administration had told them that a woman was in fact a CIA officer. A federal court decided they were not entitled to any protection for their sources in a criminal trial. *New York Times* reporter Judith Miller spent 85 days in jail; she was released after a government official authorized her to talk about their conversation. There is no federal shield law that will protect journalists, though such laws exist in 34 states.

In recent years, discussions of source confidentiality and shield laws have once again come back into the news, particularly in the context of the War on Terror. In recent years, several major stories about the fight against terrorism—from Abu Ghirab, to CIA black site prisons, to the NSA domestic surveillance programs—have been broken by whistleblowers from inside the government. In rare cases—most notably Edward Snowden—the person has been willing to come forward, but more have wanted to remain anonymous (such individuals have often been subject to prosecution). This highlights a fundamental tension in a democratic society between freedom of the press (and freedom to investigate government abuses) and the protection of government secrets. We consider this issue more in the What Would You Do? box on page 288.



Activists urge Congress to pass a law shielding reporters from being required to testify about their sources.



## What Would You Do?

NEWS

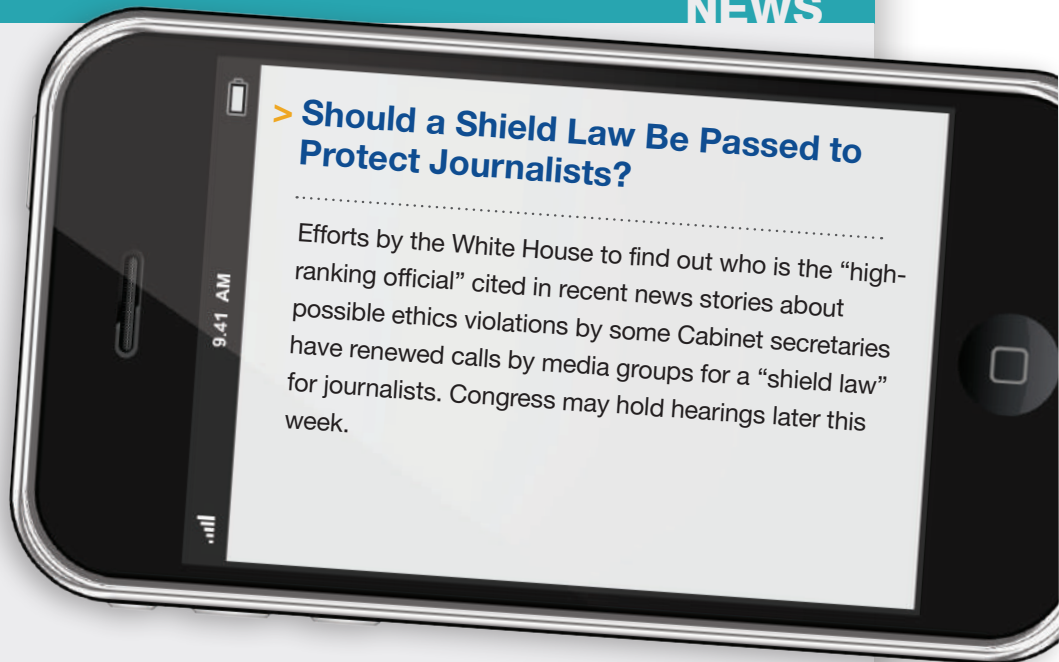
### Memorandum

**To:** Senator Brian Dillon

**From:** Political communication strategist Lucy Rae

**Subject:** Protecting journalists

The Supreme Court has held that forcing a reporter to testify does not violate the First Amendment to the Constitution. But Congress could pass a law, similar to that in many states, banning such testimony if it reveals a confidential source.



### Arguments for:

1. Thirty-four states now have shield laws similar to the one proposed by Congress.
2. Effective journalism requires protecting sources from being identified; without protection, a lot of important stories would not be written.
3. The government should be able to collect sufficient information to prosecute cases without relying on journalists to do this work for them.

### Arguments against:

1. Every person accused in a criminal trial has a right to know all of the evidence against him or her and to confront witnesses. A shield law would deprive people of this right.
2. A shield law would allow any government official to leak secret information with no fear of being detected.
3. The Supreme Court already has imposed a high barrier to forcing reporters to reveal confidential information, but that barrier should not be absolute, as situations can and do arise where a reporter is the only person who has the information necessary to investigate alleged criminal activity that threatens national security.

Your decision:

Support bill

Oppose bill

## Why Do We Have So Many News Leaks?

This tension over source confidentiality and shield laws raises an important question: why are there so many leaks in American government? Why do so many



### HOW WE COMPARE

#### Freedom of the Press

The Antifederalists insisted on adding a Bill of Rights to the Constitution because they feared government intrusion into citizens' lives. Their first concern, as reflected in the First Amendment, was to protect speech and expression, which includes freedom of the press. Although the protection is not absolute—the Supreme Court has ruled that there are times when that freedom may be restricted by the government for national security, for example—the burden of proof is on the government to demonstrate when imposing a restriction is constitutionally necessary.

Not all advanced industrialized democracies provide such broad protection for the media. In the United Kingdom, for example, libel laws are stricter than in the United States, which is why celebrities and business sometimes seek restitution in the former over the latter. Some European democracies have prohibitions on hate speech, which the United States does not (though the United States does impose restrictions on other types of speech that can appear in media outlets, such as obscenity or threats of violence). According to a recent report by Freedom House, an organization that tracks various measurements of freedom cross-nationally, access to free and independent media has declined worldwide. Of 197 countries and territories for which Freedom House evaluated media coverage in 2013, 63 (32 percent) were rated Free, 68 (35 percent) were rated Partly Free, and 66 (33 percent) were rated Not Free.

#### Countries at Top of Global Press Freedom Rankings, Freedom House, 2012

1. Norway, Sweden, and the Netherlands (tied for first place)
2. Belgium and Finland (tied for next ranking)

(The United States is tied for 30th place.)

#### Countries at Bottom of Global Press Freedom Rankings, Freedom House, 2012

1. North Korea (lowest press freedom)
2. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (tied for 195th place)
3. Eritrea
4. Belarus

**Source:** Freedom House, “Freedom of the Press 2014.”

insiders go to the press with their story to try and generate change? The answer lies in the Constitution. Because we have separate institutions that must share power, each branch of government competes with the others to get power. One way to compete is to try to use the press to advance your pet projects and to make the other side look bad. There are far fewer leaks in other democratic nations in part because power is centralized in the hands of a prime minister, who does not need to leak in order to get the upper hand over the legislature, and because the legislature has too little information to be a good source of leaks. In addition, we have no Official Secrets Act of the kind that exists in the United Kingdom; except for a few matters, it is not against the law for the press to receive and print government secrets.

Even if the press and the politicians loved each other, the competition between the various branches of government would guarantee plenty of news leaks. But since the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, and the Iran-Contra Affair, the press and the politicians have come to distrust one another. As a result, journalists today are far less willing to accept at face value the statements of elected officials and are far more likely to try to find somebody who will leak “the real story.” We have come, in short, to have an **adversarial press**—that is, one that (at least at the national level) is suspicious of officialdom and eager to break an embarrassing story that will win for its author honor, prestige, and (in some cases) a lot of money.

This cynicism and distrust of government and elected officials have led to an era of attack journalism—seizing upon any bit of information or rumor that might call into question the qualifications or character of a public official. Media coverage of gaffes—misspoken words, misstated ideas, clumsy moves—has become a staple of political journalism. At one time, such “events” as President Ford slipping down some stairs, Governor Dukakis dropping the ball while playing catch with a Boston Red Sox player, or Vice President Quayle misspelling the word *potato* would have been ignored, but now they are hot news items. Attacking public figures has become a professional norm, where once it was a professional taboo, reinforcing the norm of negativity we discussed earlier in the chapter.

## Regulating Broadcasting and Ownership

Although newspapers and magazines by and large are not regulated, broadcasting is regulated by the government. No one may operate a radio or television station

**adversarial press** The tendency of the national media to be suspicious of officials and eager to reveal unflattering stories about them.



RosalteneBetancourt / iAlamy

*Fox News and similar outlets arose after the end of the fairness doctrine.*

**equal time rule** An FCC rule that if a broadcaster sells time to one candidate, it must sell equal time to other candidates.

without a license from the Federal Communications Commission, renewable every seven years for radio and every five for television stations. An application

for renewal is rarely refused, but until recently the FCC required the broadcaster to submit detailed information about its programming and how it planned to serve “community needs” in order to get a renewal. Based on this information or on the complaints of some group, the FCC could use its powers of renewal to influence what the station put on the air. For example, it could induce stations to reduce the amount of violence shown, increase the proportion of “public service” programs on the air, or alter the way it portrayed various ethnic groups.

Of late a movement has arisen to deregulate broadcasting, on the grounds that so many stations are now on the air that competition should be allowed to determine how each station defines and serves community needs. In this view, citizens can choose what they want to hear or see without the government’s shaping the content of each station’s programming. For example, since the early 1980s, a station can simply submit a postcard requesting that its license be renewed, a request automatically granted unless some group formally opposes the renewal. In that case, the FCC holds a hearing. As a result, some of the old rules—for instance, that each hour on TV could contain only 16 minutes of commercials—are no longer rigidly enforced.

Radio broadcasting has been deregulated the most. Before 1992, one company could own one AM and one FM station in each market. In 1992, this number was doubled. And in 1996, the Telecommunications

Act allowed one company to own as many as eight stations in large markets (five in smaller ones) and as many as it wished nationally. This trend has had two results. First, a few large companies now own most of the big-market radio stations. Second, the looser editorial restrictions that accompanied deregulation mean that a greater variety of opinions and shows can be found on the radio. There are many more radio talk shows than would have been heard when content was more tightly controlled.

More generally, over time, the federal government has loosened rules on ownership, so that large corporations now control a larger share of media outlets (for the current rules, visit the FCC’s website).<sup>85</sup> Indeed, media ownership has become strikingly concentrated. In the 1980s, more than 50 companies controlled the majority of American media outlets. Today, only six companies control more than 90 percent of media outlets.<sup>86</sup> So while there are hundreds of television stations, and thousands of newspapers and radio stations, they are owned by a relatively small set of actors. This raises concerns about owners biasing the content their stations broadcast. While studies have found that owners do not bias content in favor of one party or the other,<sup>87</sup> owners can bias reporting in other ways. For example, one study examined how various newspapers reported on the 1996 Telecommunications Act, and found that papers whose parent companies stood to profit from the act reported on it more favorably than those who did not.<sup>88</sup> This sort of finding raises concerns that ownership concentration affects what gets reported, though more research is needed on this topic.

Deregulation not only changes the ownership structure of media, but also government regulation of what media say. At one time, for example, a “fairness doctrine” required broadcasters that air one side of a story to give time to opposing points of view. But there are now so many radio and television stations that the FCC relies on competition to manage differences of opinion. The abandonment of the fairness doctrine permitted the rise of controversial talk radio shows and partisan cable TV news. If the doctrine had stayed in place, there would be no programs from Rush Limbaugh or Al Franken, no MSNBC or Fox News.<sup>89</sup> The FCC decided that competition among news outlets protected people by giving them many different sources of news.

There still exists an **equal time rule** that obliges stations that sell advertising time to one political candidate to sell equal time to that person’s opponents. When candidates wish to campaign on radio or television, the equal time rule applies.





## LANDMARK CASES

### The Rights of the Media

- ***Near v. Minnesota (1931)***: Freedom of the press applies to state governments, so that they cannot impose prior restraint on newspapers.
- ***New York Times v. Sullivan (1964)***: Public officials may not win a libel suit unless they can prove that the statement was made knowing it to be false or with reckless disregard of its truth.
- ***Miami Herald v. Tornillo (1974)***: A newspaper cannot be required to give someone a right to reply to one of its stories.

### Regulating Campaigning

During campaigns, a broadcaster must provide equal access to candidates for office and charge them rates no higher than the cheapest rate applicable to commercial advertisers for comparable time. At one time, this rule meant that a station or network could not broadcast a debate between the Democratic and Republican candidates for an office without inviting all other candidates as well—Libertarian, Prohibitionist, or whatever. Thus, a presidential debate in 1980 could be limited to the major candidates, Reagan and Carter (or

Reagan and Anderson), only by having the League of Women Voters sponsor it and then allowing radio and TV to cover it as a “news event.” Now stations and networks can themselves sponsor debates limited to major candidates.

Though laws guarantee that candidates can buy time at favorable rates on television, not all candidates take advantage of this. The reason is that television is not always an efficient way to reach voters. A television message is literally “broad cast”—spread out to a mass audience without regard to the boundaries of the district in which a candidate is running. Presidential candidates, of course, always use television because their constituency is the whole nation. Candidates for senator or representative, however, may or may not use television, depending on whether the boundaries of their state or district conform well to the boundaries of a television market.

A *market* is an area easily reached by a television signal; there are about 200 such markets in the country. If you are a member of Congress from South Bend, Indiana, you come from a television market based there. You can buy ads on the TV stations in South Bend at a reasonable fee. But if you are a member of Congress from northern New Jersey, the only television stations are in nearby New York City. In that market, the costs of a TV ad are very high because they reach a lot of people, most of whom are not in your district and so cannot vote for you. Buying a TV ad is a waste of money. As a result, a much higher percentage of Senate than House candidates use television ads.



## CONSTITUTIONAL CONNECTIONS

### Journalism, Secrecy, and Politics

The role of media in American politics was not a high priority in drafting the Constitution. The First Amendment (added as part of the Bill of Rights in 1791) guaranteed freedom of the press, and the Framers appreciated the need for independent journalism in a democracy, but they did not pay significant attention to how journalists would affect governance. Yet the very ratification of the Constitution depended partly on cooperation from journalists, first in the secrecy surrounding the constitutional convention debates in Philadelphia in the summer of

1787, and second in the publication in New York newspapers of the *Federalist Papers* endorsing ratification of the Constitution (though newspapers at the time were party presses rather than independent organizations). With the 24-hour news cycle, politicians today have fewer opportunities to engage in policymaking without media scrutiny, and while media coverage provides an essential check on elected officials, it also can hinder prospects for decision making and compromise.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES .....

### 12-1 Trace the evolution of the press in America, explaining how media coverage of politics has changed over time.

Over time, the press evolved from a partisan mouthpiece to an independent political actor. Today, through the Internet and television, politicians have more opportunity than ever before to shape their political images.

### 12-2 Summarize the most important sources of news for contemporary Americans, and discuss the consequences of consuming different news sources.

Today, most Americans get their news from television, though the Internet is increasingly important as well, especially for younger voters. With more media choice, however, some voters have become less informed and hence less likely to participate. Furthermore, with the decline in local newspapers, there is concern that citizens may not be getting the local information they need to participate effectively.

### 12-3 Explain the main political functions of the media in America, and discuss how the media both enhance and detract from American democracy.

The mass media serves to help educate the public in a democracy. Two particular ways this happens are by setting the public agenda and

by serving as a watchdog to maintain political accountability. There are also ways in which the media can lead viewers astray, through framing, covering campaigns as a game, or an overreliance on sensationalism and negativity. Viewers should be on guard to protect themselves from these tendencies.

### 12-4 Discuss the reasons behind lower levels of media trust today, and summarize the arguments for and against media bias.

Overall levels of trust in the media have declined sharply in recent years, both generally and for nearly all specific media outlets. Part of the reason is that politicians from both parties attack the media as biased, leading ordinary citizens to think the media is biased (and hence less trustworthy). Overall, the evidence suggests that there is not much systematic bias in favor of one party or the other in the media.

### 12-5 Explain how government controls and regulates the media.

Government regulations control both media ownership and media content, though the First Amendment prohibits many stricter sorts of interference.

## TO LEARN MORE .....

To search many news sources: [www.ipl.org](http://www.ipl.org)

To get analyses of the press:

Nonpartisan view: [www.cmpa.com](http://www.cmpa.com)

Liberal view: [www.fair.org](http://www.fair.org)

Conservative view: [www.mrc.org](http://www.mrc.org)

Public opinion about the press:

Pew Research Center: [www.people-press.org](http://www.people-press.org)

National media:

*New York Times*: [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)

*Wall Street Journal*: [www.wsj.com](http://www.wsj.com)

*Washington Post*: [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com)

Compilation of major daily news sources:  
[www.realclearpolitics.com](http://www.realclearpolitics.com)

Graber, Doris A. *Mass Media and American Politics*, 8th ed. Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2010. A good summary of what we know about the press and politics.

Groseclose, Tim. *Left Turn: How Liberal Media Bias Distorts the American Mind*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2011. The best evidence documenting several examples of pro-liberal/Democratic media bias.

Iyengar, Shanto, and Donald R. Kinder. *News That Matters*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987. The report of experiments testing the effect of television news on public perceptions of politics.

Ladd, Jonathan. 2012. *Why Americans Hate the News and Why It Matters*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. An exploration of growing media distrust in the public.

Lichter, S. Robert, Stanley Rothman, and Linda S. Lichter. *The Media Elite*. Bethesda, MD: Adler and Adler, 1986. A study of the political beliefs of elite journalists and how those beliefs influence what we read and hear.

Patterson, Thomas. 1993. *Out of Order*. New York: Alfred Knopf. A study of the decline of substantive coverage of campaigns, and the rise of the game frame.

Prior, Markus. 2006. *Post-Broadcast Democracy*. New York: Cambridge University Press. An explanation of how media choice decreases knowledge and participation in politics.

Stroud, Natalie Jomini. *Niche News: The Politics of News Choice*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Extensive empirical analysis of how political partisanship shapes the news sources that people use.

---

**MindTap** **MindTap** is a fully online, highly personalized learning experience built upon Cengage Learning content. MindTap combines student learning tools—readings, multimedia, activities, and assessments—into a singular Learning Path that guides students through the course.



