The Media and Politics

Inquire: Is Mass Media Fair or Biased?

Overview
The media plays a vital role as a linkage institution, bringing the people and their issues, problems, and concerns into the public policy cycle. Legislative bodies and government executives at various levels are incredibly sensitive to the media and the voice it gives to the people.

We are also certainly in an era of antagonism between the media and the government, as illustrated by President Obama’s feud with Fox News. Gone are the days when FDR could request that no pictures be taken of him in his wheelchair — so the people would not see him as weak — and the press honor that wish.

So, how does this important linkage institution in American politics — the media — get the people’s message across to the government?

Big Question: How does the media impact public policy?

Watch: Newspapers and Print Media: The Once - or Future - King?
Mass media today can be in print, radio, television, or Internet news, but in the beginning, it was only print. Print media’s evolution is a microcosm of the change in media as a whole.

Early news was presented to local populations through the printing press. While several colonies had printers and occasional newspapers, Boston’s high literacy rates combined with the desire for self-government made it a perfect location for the creation of a newspaper; the first continuous press was started there in 1704.

Newspapers spread information about local events and activities. The Stamp Tax of 1765 raised costs for publishers, however, leading several newspapers to fold under the increased cost of paper. The repeal of the Stamp Tax in 1766 quieted concerns for a short while, but editors and writers soon began questioning the right of the British to rule the colonies.

Between 1830 and 1860, machines and manufacturing made the production of newspapers faster and less expensive. The popular penny press papers and magazines contained more gossip than news, but they were affordable at a penny per issue.
In the late 1800s, Joseph Pulitzer and the *New York World* gave readers what they wanted. The tabloid-style paper included editorial pages, cartoons, and pictures, while the front-page news was sensational and scandalous. This style of coverage became known as yellow journalism. With the arrival of the Progressive Era, the media began muckraking: the writing and publishing of news coverage that exposes corrupt business and government practices.

Newspapers remained viable and strong through the end of the 1900s, but the Internet has taken a toll. In the 21st century, newspapers have struggled to stay financially stable. Print media earned $44.9 billion from ads in 2003, but only $16.4 billion from ads in 2014.

Given the countless alternate forms of news, many of which are free, newspaper subscriptions and advertising revenues have fallen. Many newspapers now maintain both a print and Internet presence in order to compete for readers. The rise of free news blogs, such as the *Huffington Post*, have made it difficult for newspapers to force readers to purchase online subscriptions to access material they place behind a digital paywall.

Some local newspapers, in an effort to stay visible and profitable, have turned to social media like Facebook and Twitter. Stories can be posted and retweeted, allowing readers to comment and forward material. Overall, newspapers continue to adapt, becoming leaner — though less thorough and investigative — versions of their earlier selves.

**Read: The Media Bias - Real or Myth?**

**Overview**

There is always a concern about bias in the news. If the media prefers one party or one candidate over another, it can create a false reality, picking specific stories and sound bites, as well as slanting the reporting, to support one side over the other.

This is especially true in our exploding media system. What started as print journalism was subsequently supplemented by radio coverage, network television, and cable television. Now, with the addition of the Internet, blogs, and social media — a set of applications or web platforms that allow users to immediately communicate with one another — media gives citizens a wide variety of sources for instant news. The Internet also allows citizens to initiate public discussion by uploading images and video for viewing, such as videos documenting interactions between citizens and the police.

Provided we are connected digitally, we have a bewildering amount of choices for how to find information about the world. In fact, some might say that compared to the tranquil days of the 1970s, when we might read the morning newspaper over breakfast and take in the network news at night, there are too many choices in today’s increasingly complex world of information. This reality may make news media all the more important to structuring and shaping narratives about U.S. politics. On the other hand, the proliferation of competing information sources like blogs and social media may actually weaken the power of the news media, relative to the days when news media monopolized our attention.

**Media Basics**

The term *media* defines a number of different communication formats from television media, which share information through broadcast airwaves, to print media, which rely on printed documents. The collection of all forms of media that communicate information to the general public is called *mass media*, including television, print, radio, and Internet. One of the primary reasons citizens turn to the media is for news. We
expect the media to cover important political and social events and share information in a concise and neutral manner.

To accomplish its work, the media employs a number of people in varied positions. Journalists and reporters are responsible for uncovering news stories by keeping an eye on areas of public interest, like politics, business, and sports. Once a journalist has a lead or a possible idea for a story, he or she researches background information and interviews people to create a complete and balanced account. Editors work in the background of the newsroom assigning stories, approving articles or packages, and editing content for accuracy and clarity. Publishers are people or companies that own and produce print or digital media. They oversee both the content and finances of the publication, ensuring the organization turns a profit and creates a high-quality product to distribute to consumers. Producers generally oversee visual media like television, radio, and film.

Concerns about media’s effect on consumers and the existence and extent of media bias go back to the 1920s. Nearly every decade since has seen a new theory emerge regarding the media’s effect — or lack thereof — on the political beliefs, thoughts, and opinions of the American public.

In the end, the consensus among observers is that media has some effect, even if the effect is subtle. This raises the question of, “How?” How can the media, even general newscasts, affect citizens and their political beliefs, thoughts, and opinions? One way the media can influence viewers is through **framing**: the creation of a narrative, or context, for a news story. The news often uses frames to place a story in a context so the reader understands its importance or relevance. Yet, at the same time, framing affects the way the reader or viewer processes the story. Using framing to create sympathy for one side of an issue or another is frequent in today’s mass media.

Regardless, it is clear that the media’s discussion of campaigns and politicians has also grown increasingly negative. Although biased campaign coverage is not new, the increase in the number of cable news stations has made the problem more visible. Stations like FOX News and MSNBC are overt in their use of bias in framing stories. During the 2012 campaign, 71 of the 74 MSNBC stories about Mitt Romney were negative, while FOX News’ coverage of Obama had 46 out of 52 stories with negative information. The major networks — ABC, CBS, and NBC — were somewhat more balanced, yet the overall coverage of both candidates tended to be negative.

![Bias in Cable News Coverage of Presidential Candidates, 2012](image)

*Media coverage of campaigns is increasingly negative, with cable news stations demonstrating more bias in their framing of stories during the 2012 campaign.*
Due in part to the lack of substantive media coverage, campaigns increasingly use social media to relay their message. Candidates can create their own sites and try to spread news through supporters to undecided voters. In 2012, both Romney and Obama maintained Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube accounts to provide information to voters. Yet, on social media, candidates still need to combat negativity, from both the opposition and supporters. Stories about Romney that appeared in the mainstream media were negative 38 percent of the time, with his Facebook news coverage being negative 62 percent of the time and Twitter coverage being negative 58 percent of the time.

In the 2016 election cycle, both party nominees heavily used social media. Donald Trump’s scores of tweets became very prominent as he tweeted during Clinton’s convention acceptance speech and sometimes at all hours of the night. Clinton also used Twitter, but less so than Trump, though arguably staying better on message. Trump tended to rail on about all topics and at one point was even drawn into a Twitter battle with Senator Elizabeth Warren. Hillary Clinton also used Facebook for longer messages and imaging.

In the end, it is up to the consumer to be aware of the issues and to draw their own conclusions. Some people will try to watch multiple news sources and meld them together for a less biased view. Regardless, simply being aware of the bias can help the viewer resist the bias and ask their own questions; hopefully, one can become a more informed voter.

Reflect: Where Do You Get Your News?

Poll: Was Reconstruction Effective?

Most high school and college students do not spend a lot of time watching TV news or listening to news on the radio. However, many still do acquire their news, “the old fashioned way.” How about you? Where do you learn about the news?

- TV
- Radio
- Newspaper
- Internet

Expand: Media Power in Public Policy

Overview

Does the media primarily report politics, or does it shape political events? Does it shape public opinion, or just provide information? Certainly, the media has power to determine the course of major political events. However, when politicians play to the media, does the media then control politics? Many people today criticize television, radio, newspapers, magazines, and the Internet for unfairly using their power as major linkage institutions between citizens and their government. Does the media fairly explore issues, or do they impose their own positions?

The Political Influence of the Media

The media can shape government and politics in many ways. Here are a few:

1. By influencing political opinions of voters. Not surprisingly, the voting behavior of people who are actively interested in politics is probably not changed by the media. Committed Democrats and
Republicans selectively learn what they want to from media sources. However, the media can sway people who are uncommitted or have no strong opinion in the first place. Since these voters often decide elections results, the power of media in elections can be substantial.

2. By determining the behavior of candidates and officials. Many good politicians have learned that they can succeed — in getting elected and in getting things done — if they know how to use the media. President Franklin Roosevelt was famous for his "Fireside Chats," in which he soothed the pain of economic depression and war by talking to citizens over the radio. President Ronald Reagan's skills as a film and television actor enabled him to also communicate very effectively with American voters. Government officials and candidates for office carefully stage media events and photo opportunities. Critics believe that too much attention is focused on how politicians look and come across on camera, rather than on how well they are doing in public service.

3. By setting the public agenda. Most Americans learn about social issues from print or electronic media. The media may not always tell the public what to think, but they certainly tell the public what topics to think about, and this is probably the most powerful impact the media has in politics. How media focuses on some issues and ignores others helps set what gets done in the government. Media sources have often been accused of emphasizing scandal and high-interest issues at the expense of duller, but more important, political problems. The government's priorities can be rearranged as a result.

For example, in the spring of 2018, there were two serious school shootings, one in Florida and one in Texas. The media drove the focus of the issue to guns and gun control and students at both schools led demonstrations and marches to change the laws and hopefully make schools safer.

The 25 combined deaths were horrible, and the loss and pain suffered by those who lost friends and loved ones should not be minimized. Yet in 2016, 5,723 people ages 15-24 committed suicide in the United States. In no way is one loss worse than another, but if one looks at sheer numbers, the suicide rate should be as large a concern, if not larger. However, there were no teen marches to stop suicides and no teen protests to change policies that might help children at risk. This isn’t because the students don’t care or would not be concerned with the issue, but because the media sets the focus, and thus sets the agenda.

The media clearly has a great deal of power in American politics today. Is this good or bad for government? From one point of view, the media abuse their power, especially since they are driven by a profit motive to give people what they want, and not necessarily what they need. On the other hand, perhaps the media serves as an important player in a modern "checks and balances" system. Reporters function as watchdogs to ensure that presidents, representatives, and justices do not abuse their powers. The media in turn is checked by government regulations, skilled politicians, and people's own good judgment.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

Media Institution: Crash Course Government and Politics #44
  ● A Crash Course video covering the media's role in politics
  ● https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6F0g4N415uw&t=83s

Shaping Public Opinion: Crash Course Government and Politics #34
  ● A Crash Course video covering the things that shape public opinion in the U.S., including media
Social media's role in the 2016 election

- A quick video showing the huge influence social media had in Trump's 2016 win
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NfUULVECAFQ
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q3FrNR7PWqc

Lesson Glossary

**mass media:** the collection of all media forms that communicate information to the general public

**framing:** the process of giving a news story a specific context or background

Check Your Knowledge

1. It is beneficial to the government that the media focus on some issues and ignore others.
   - A. True
   - B. False

2. The newspaper was created in New Amsterdam, the location of the first continuous press in 1705.
   - A. True
   - B. False

3. By _____________________________, the media tells the public what to think about and thus has the most powerful impact in politics.
   - A. determining the behavior of candidates and officials
   - B. setting the public agenda
   - C. influencing political opinions of voters
   - D. altering news stories

Answer Key:

Citations

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