

- Explain how functions of the media may help to keep government small and how other functions may encourage the growth of government.
- Describe how the rise of television broadcasting has encouraged individualism in the American political system.
- Explain why the rise of the “information society” has not brought about a corresponding rise of an “informed society.”
- Summarize how the news and its presentation are important influences in shaping public opinion on political issues.

## CHAPTER OVERVIEW

### INTRODUCTION

The American political system has entered a new period of **high-tech politics** in which the behavior of citizens and policymakers, as well as the political agenda itself, is increasingly shaped by technology. The **mass media** are a key part of that technology. Television, radio, newspapers, magazines, and other means of popular communication are called mass media because they reach out and profoundly influence not only the elites but the masses. This chapter describes the historical development of the mass media as it relates to news coverage of government and politics. Questions regarding how news is defined, how it is presented, and what impact it has in politics are also addressed.

### THE MASS MEDIA TODAY

Modern political success depends upon control of the mass media. Image making does not stop with the campaign. It is also a critical element in day-to-day governing since politicians’ images in the press are seen as good indicators of their clout. Politicians have learned that one way to guide the media’s focus successfully is to limit what they can report on to carefully scripted events. A **media event** is staged primarily for the purpose of being covered. A large part of today’s so-called *30-second presidency* is the slickly produced TV commercial. Few, if any, administrations devoted so much effort and energy to the president’s media appearance as did Ronald Reagan’s.

The Reagan White House operated on the following seven principles:

- 1) Plan ahead.
- 2) Stay on the offensive.
- 3) Control the flow of information.
- 4) Limit reporters’ access to the president.
- 5) Talk about the issues you want to talk about.
- 6) Speak in one voice.
- 7) Repeat the same message many times.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF MEDIA POLITICS

The daily newspaper is largely a product of the late nineteenth century, while radio and television have been around only since the first half of the twentieth century. As recently as the presidency of Herbert Hoover (1929–1933), reporters submitted their questions to the president in writing, and he responded in writing (if at all). Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933–1945) was the first president to use the media effectively. Roosevelt held about *one thousand press conferences* in his 12 years in the White House and broadcast a series of “*fireside chats*” over the radio to reassure the nation during the Great Depression.

At the time of Roosevelt’s administration, the press had not yet started to report on a political leader’s public life. The events of the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal soured the press on government. Today’s newspeople work in an environment of cynicism; the press sees ferreting out the truth as their job since they believe that politicians rarely tell the whole story. **Investigative journalism**—the use of detective-like reporting methods to unearth scandals—pits reporters against political leaders. There is evidence that TV’s fondness for investigative journalism has contributed to greater public cynicism and negativism about politics.

Scholars distinguish between two kinds of media: the **print media**, which include newspapers and magazines, and the **broadcast media**, which consist of television, radio, and the Internet. Each has reshaped political communication at different points in American history.

The first American daily newspaper was printed in Philadelphia in 1783, but daily newspapers did not become common until the technological advances of the mid-nineteenth century. Ever since the rise of TV news, however, newspaper circulation rates have been declining.

The broadcast media have gradually displaced the print media as Americans’ principal source of news and information. As a form of technology, television is almost as old as radio; the first television station appeared in 1931. Nevertheless, the 1950s and 1960s were the developmental years for American television. The first televised presidential debates were the 1960 Kennedy–Nixon debates. The poll results from this debate illustrate the visual power of television in American politics: whereas people listening to the radio gave the edge to Nixon, those who saw it on television thought Kennedy won.

Television took the nation to the war in Vietnam during the 1960s, and TV exposed governmental naïveté (some said it was outright lying) about the progress of the war. With the growth of *cable TV*, particularly the Cable News Network (CNN), television has entered a new era of bringing news to people (and to political leaders) *as it happens*. Since 1963, surveys have consistently shown that more people rely on TV for the news than on any other medium. And by a regular two-to-one margin, people think television reports are more believable than newspaper stories. Young people are particularly likely to rely on television, as opposed to newspapers, for news.

In 1934, Congress created the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to regulate the use of airwaves. Today, the FCC regulates communications via radio, television, telephone, cable, and satellite. The FCC is an independent regulatory body, but in practice it is subject to many political pressures. The FCC has regulated the airwaves in three important ways. First, to prevent near-monopolies of control over a broadcast market, it has instituted rules to limit the number of stations owned or controlled by one company. Second, the FCC conducts periodic examinations of the goals and performance of stations as part of its licensing authority. Third, the FCC has issued a number of fair treatment rules concerning access to the airwaves for political candidates and officeholders.

With the increase in cable channels and Internet usage, a recent trend has been the increase in “broadcast” channels that are oriented toward particularly narrow audiences, often referred to as **narrowcasting**. Traditional broadcast news is being partially replaced by political Web sites, bloggers, and even Jon Stewart’s *The Daily Show*. With so many readily available sources of information (cable, satellite, Internet, etc.) for so many specific interests, it will also be extremely easy for those who are not very interested in politics to completely avoid news and public affairs. Further, scholars are not impressed with the news value of most of what is broadcast on cable news networks. At the same time, those who *are* interested can now access far more information than before due to the limitless possibilities of the Internet and the democratization of the news through blogging and other trends. The result could well be an increasing inequality of political information, with the politically interested becoming even more knowledgeable while the rest of the public slips further into political apathy.

Only a relatively small number of TV stations are publicly owned in America, and these PBS stations play a minimal role in the news business, attracting low ratings. In contrast, in many other countries major TV networks are owned by the government.

## REPORTING THE NEWS

Although the American media is free and independent when it comes to journalistic content, they are totally dependent on advertising revenues to keep their businesses going. That is, news reporting is a *business* in America in which *profits shape how journalists define what is newsworthy, where they get their information, and how they present it*. To a large extent, TV networks define *news* as what is entertaining to the average viewer.

A surprising amount of news comes from *well-established sources*. Most news organizations assign their best reporters to particular **beats**—specific locations from which news frequently emanates, such as Congress. Very little of the news is generated by spontaneous events or a reporter’s own analysis. Most stories are drawn from situations over which *newsmakers have substantial control*. For example, those who make the news depend on the media to spread certain information and ideas to the general public. Sometimes they feed stories to reporters in the form of **trial balloons**: information leaked to see what the political reaction will be.

TV news is little more than a headline service. With exceptions like the *Newshour* (PBS) and *Nightline* (ABC), analysis of news events rarely lasts more than a minute. At the same time, complex issues—like nuclear power, the nation’s money supply, and pollution—are difficult to treat in a short news clip.

Strangely enough, as technology has enabled the media to pass along information with greater speed, news coverage has become less thorough. Newspapers once routinely reprinted the entire text of important political speeches; now the *New York Times* is virtually the only paper that does so—and even the *Times* has cut back sharply on this practice. In place of speeches, Americans now hear sound bites of less than ten seconds on TV.

The charge that the media have a *liberal bias* has become a familiar one in American politics, and there is some limited evidence to support it. National reporters are more likely to call themselves liberal than the general public, and more journalists identify themselves as Democrats than Republicans. However, there is little reason to believe that journalists’ personal attitudes sway their reporting of the news. Most stories are presented in a “point/counterpoint” format in which two opposing points of view are presented.

A conclusion that news reporting contains little explicit *partisan or ideological* bias is *not* to argue that it does not *distort reality* in its coverage. Ideally, the news should mirror reality. In practice, there are too many potential stories for this to be the case. Journalists must select which stories to cover and to what degree. Due to economic pressures, the media are biased in favor of stories with high drama that will attract people’s interest (rather than extended analyses of complex issues). Television is particularly biased toward stories that generate good pictures. Seeing a talking head (a shot of a person’s face talking directly to the camera) is boring; viewers will switch channels in search of more interesting visual stimulation.

## THE NEWS AND PUBLIC OPINION

For many years, students of the subject tended to doubt that the media had more than a marginal effect on public opinion. The “minimal effects hypothesis” stemmed from the fact that early scholars were looking for direct impacts—for example, whether the media affected how people voted. When the focus turned to how the media affect *what Americans think about*, more positive results were uncovered. The decision to cover or to ignore certain issues can affect public opinion. By focusing public attention on specific problems, the media influence the criteria by which the public evaluates political leaders.

## THE MEDIA’S AGENDA-SETTING FUNCTION

As was explained in Chapter 1, people are trying to influence the government’s **policy agenda** when they confront government officials with problems they expect them to solve. Interest groups, political parties, politicians, public relations firms, and bureaucratic agencies are all pushing for their priorities to take precedence over others. *Political activists* (often called **policy entrepreneurs**—people who invest their political “capital”

in an issue) depend heavily upon the *media* to get their ideas placed high on the governmental agenda.

The *staging of political events to attract media attention* is a political art form. Important political events are orchestrated minute by minute with an eye on American TV audiences. Moreover, it is not only the elites who have successfully used the media. Civil rights groups in the 1960s relied heavily on the media to tell their stories of unjust treatment. Many believe that the introduction of television helped to accelerate the movement by graphically showing Americans (in both the North and South) what the situation was.

## UNDERSTANDING THE MASS MEDIA

The media act as *key linkage institutions* between the people and the policymakers and have a profound impact on the political policy agenda.

The watchdog function of the media *helps to keep government small*. Many observers feel that the press is *biased against whoever holds office* and that reporters want to expose them in the media. With every new proposal being met with skepticism, regular constraints are placed on the growth of government. Conversely, when they focus on injustice in society, the media inevitably *encourage the growth of government*. The media *portray government as responsible for handling* almost every major problem.

The rise of television has furthered individualism in the American political process. Candidates are now much more capable of running for office on their own by appealing to people directly through television. Television finds it easier to focus on individuals than on groups. As a result, parties have declined, and candidate personality is more important than ever.

The rise of the “information society” has not brought about a corresponding rise of an “informed society.” With the media’s superficial treatment of important policy issues, it is not surprising that the incredible amount of information available to Americans today has not visibly increased their political awareness or participation. The media’s defense is to say that this is what the people want. Since they are in business to make a profit, they have to appeal to the maximum number of people.