

Chapter 8

The Media



Figure 8.1 On August 8, 2015, activists for Black Lives Matter in Seattle commandeered presidential candidate Bernie Sanders' campaign rally in an effort to get their message out. (credit: modification of work by Tiffany Von Annim)

Chapter Outline

- 8.1 What Is the Media?
- 8.2 The Evolution of the Media
- 8.3 Regulating the Media
- 8.4 The Impact of the Media

Introduction

Democratic primary candidate Bernie Sanders arrived in Seattle on August 8, 2015, to give a speech at a rally to promote his presidential campaign. Instead, the rally was interrupted—and eventually co-opted—by activists for Black Lives Matter (**Figure 8.1**).¹ Why did the group risk alienating Democratic voters by preventing Sanders from speaking? Because Black Lives Matter had been trying to raise awareness of the treatment of black citizens in the United States, and the media has the power to elevate such issues.² While some questioned its tactics, the organization's move underscores how important the media are to gaining recognition, and the lengths to which organizations are willing to go to get media attention.³

Freedom of the press and an independent media are important dimensions of a liberal society and a necessary part of a healthy democracy. “No government ought to be without censors,” said Thomas Jefferson, “and where the press is free, no one ever will.”⁴ What does it mean to have a free news media? What regulations limit what media can do? How do the media contribute to informing citizens and monitoring politicians and the government, and how do we measure their impact? This chapter explores these and other questions about the role of the media in the United States.

8.1 What Is the Media?

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain what the media are and how they are organized
 - Describe the main functions of the media in a free society
 - Compare different media formats and their respective audiences
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Ours is an exploding media system. What started as print journalism was subsequently supplemented by radio coverage, then network television, followed by 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—give citizens a wide variety of sources for instant news of all kinds. 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, for example. Provided we are connected digitally, we have a bewildering amount of choices for finding 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 now too many choices in today's increasingly complex world of information. This reality may make the news media all the more important to structuring and shaping narratives about U.S. politics. Or 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 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 oversee the production and finances of visual media, like television, radio, and film.

The work of the news media differs from **public relations**, which is communication carried out to improve the image of companies, organizations, or candidates for office. Public relations is not a neutral information form. While journalists write stories to inform the public, a public relations spokesperson is paid to help an individual or organization get positive press. Public relations materials normally appear as press releases or paid advertisements in newspapers and other media outlets. Some less reputable publications, however, publish paid articles under the news banner, blurring the line between journalism and public relations.

MEDIA TYPES

Each form of media has its own complexities and is used by different demographics. Millennials (currently aged 21–37) are more likely to get news and information from social media, such as YouTube, Twitter, and

Facebook, while Baby Boomers (currently aged 54–72) are most likely to get their news from television, either national broadcasts or local news (**Figure 8.2**).

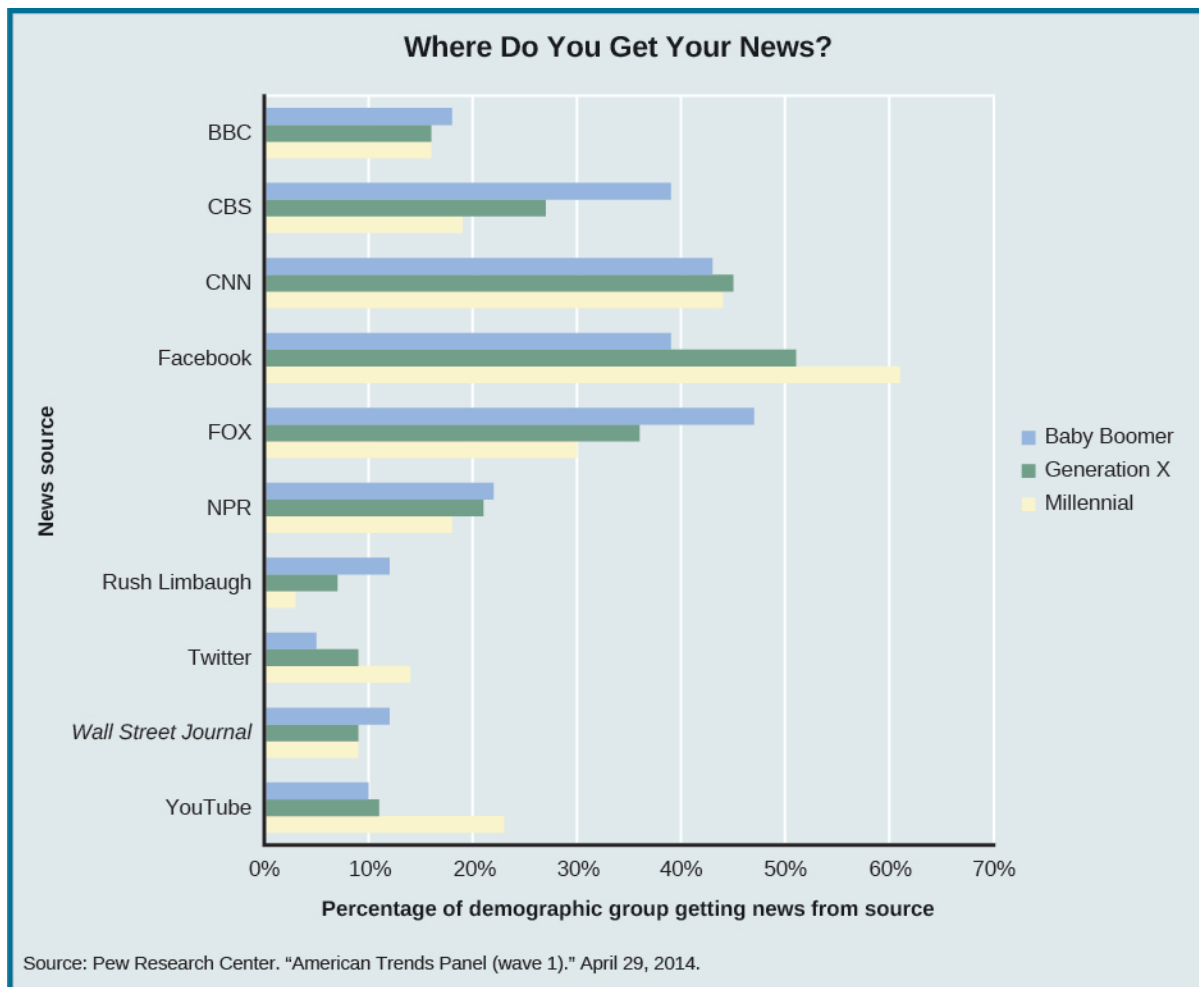


Figure 8.2 Age greatly influences the choice of news sources. Baby Boomers are more likely to get news and information from television, while members of Generation X and Millennials are more likely to use social media.

Television alone offers viewers a variety of formats. Programming may be scripted, like dramas or comedies. It may be unscripted, like game shows or reality programs, or informative, such as news programming. Although most programs are created by a television production company, national networks—like CBS or NBC—purchase the rights to programs they distribute to local stations across the United States. Most local stations are affiliated with a national network corporation, and they broadcast national network programming to their local viewers.

Before the existence of cable and fiber optics, networks needed to own local affiliates to have access to the local station's transmission towers. Towers have a limited radius, so each network needed an affiliate in each major city to reach viewers. While cable technology has lessened networks' dependence on aerial signals, some viewers still use antennas and receivers to view programming broadcast from local towers.

Affiliates, by agreement with the networks, give priority to network news and other programming chosen by the affiliate's national media corporation. Local affiliate stations are told when to air programs or commercials, and they diverge only to inform the public about a local or national emergency. For example, ABC affiliates broadcast the popular television show *Once Upon a Time* at a specific time on a specific day. Should a fire threaten homes and businesses in a local area, the affiliate might preempt it to update citizens

on the fire's dangers and return to regularly scheduled programming after the danger has ended.

Most affiliate stations will show local news before and after network programming to inform local viewers of events and issues. Network news has a national focus on politics, international events, the economy, and more. Local news, on the other hand, is likely to focus on matters close to home, such as regional business, crime, sports, and weather.⁵ The *NBC Nightly News*, for example, covers presidential campaigns and the White House or skirmishes between North Korea and South Korea, while the NBC affiliate in Los Angeles (KNBC-TV) and the NBC affiliate in Dallas (KXAS-TV) report on the governor's activities or weekend festivals in the region.

Cable programming offers national networks a second method to directly reach local viewers. As the name implies, cable stations transmit programming directly to a local cable company hub, which then sends the signals to homes through coaxial or fiber optic cables. Because cable does not broadcast programming through the airwaves, cable networks can operate across the nation directly without local affiliates. Instead they purchase broadcasting rights for the cable stations they believe their viewers want. For this reason, cable networks often specialize in different types of programming.

The Cable News Network (CNN) was the first news station to take advantage of this specialized format, creating a 24-hour news station with live coverage and interview programs. Other news stations quickly followed, such as MSNBC and FOX News. A viewer might tune in to Nickelodeon and catch family programs and movies or watch ESPN to catch up with the latest baseball or basketball scores. The Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network, known better as C-SPAN, now has three channels covering Congress, the president, the courts, and matters of public interest.

Cable and satellite providers also offer on-demand programming for most stations. Citizens can purchase cable, satellite, and Internet subscription services (like Netflix) to find programs to watch instantly, without being tied to a schedule. Initially, on-demand programming was limited to rebroadcasting old content and was commercial-free. Yet many networks and programs now allow their new programming to be aired within a day or two of its initial broadcast. In return they often add commercials the user cannot fast-forward or avoid. Thus networks expect advertising revenues to increase.⁶

The on-demand nature of the Internet has created many opportunities for news outlets. While early media providers were those who could pay the high cost of printing or broadcasting, modern media require just a URL and ample server space. The ease of online publication has made it possible for more niche media outlets to form. The websites of the *New York Times* and other newspapers often focus on matters affecting the United States, while channels like BBC America present world news. FOX News presents political commentary and news in a conservative vein, while the Internet site Daily Kos offers a liberal perspective on the news. Politico.com is perhaps the leader in niche journalism.

Unfortunately, the proliferation of online news has also increased the amount of poorly written material with little editorial oversight, and readers must be cautious when reading Internet news sources. Sites like Buzzfeed allow members to post articles without review by an editorial board, leading to articles of varied quality and accuracy. The Internet has also made publication speed a consideration for professional journalists. No news outlet wants to be the last to break a story, and the rush to publication often leads to typographical and factual errors. Even large news outlets, like the Associated Press, have published articles with errors in their haste to get a story out.

The Internet also facilitates the flow of information through social media, which allows users to instantly communicate with one another and share with audiences that can grow exponentially. Facebook and Twitter have millions of daily users. Social media changes more rapidly than the other media formats. While people in many different age groups use sites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, other sites like Snapchat and Yik Yak appeal mostly to younger users. The platforms also serve different functions. Tumblr and Reddit facilitate discussion that is topic-based and controversial, while Instagram is mostly social. A growing number of these sites also allow users to comment anonymously, leading to increases in threats and abuse. The site 4chan, for example, was linked to the 2015 shooting at an Oregon community college.⁷

Regardless of where we get our information, the various media avenues available today, versus years ago, make it much easier for everyone to be engaged. The question is: Who controls the media we rely on? Most media are controlled by a limited number of conglomerates. A conglomerate is a corporation made up of a number of companies, organizations, and media networks. In the 1980s, more than fifty companies owned the majority of television and radio stations and networks. Now, only six conglomerates control most of the broadcast media in the United States: CBS Corporation, Comcast, Time Warner, 21st Century Fox (formerly News Corporation), Viacom, and The Walt Disney Company (**Figure 8.3**).⁸ The Walt Disney Company, for example, owns the ABC Television Network, ESPN, A&E, and Lifetime, in addition to the Disney Channel. Viacom owns BET, Comedy Central, MTV, Nickelodeon, and VH1. Time Warner owns Cartoon Network, CNN, HBO, and TNT, among others. While each of these networks has its own programming, in the end, the conglomerate can make a policy that affects all stations and programming under its control.

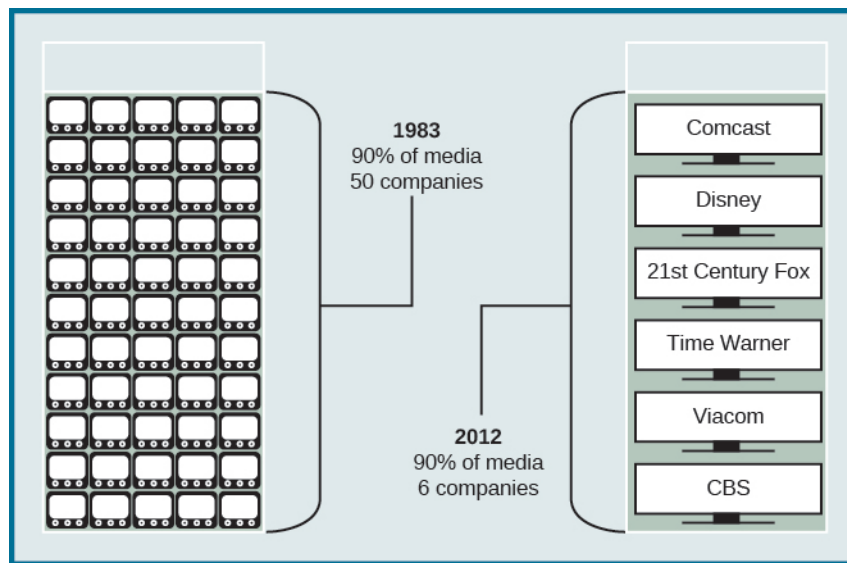


Figure 8.3 In 1983, fifty companies owned 90 percent of U.S. media. By 2012, just six conglomerates controlled the same percentage of U.S. media outlets.

Conglomerates can create a monopoly on information by controlling a sector of a market. When a media conglomerate has policies or restrictions, they will apply to all stations or outlets under its ownership, potentially limiting the information citizens receive. Conglomerate ownership also creates circumstances in which censorship may occur. iHeartMedia (formerly Clear Channel Media) owns music, radio, and billboards throughout the United States, and in 2010, the company refused to run several billboard ads for the St. Pete Pride Festival and Promenade in St. Petersburg, Florida. The festival organizers said the content of two ads, a picture of same-sex couples in close contact with one another, was the reason the ads were not run. Because iHeartMedia owns most of the billboards in the area, this limitation was problematic for the festival and decreased awareness of the event. Those in charge of the festival viewed the refusal as censorship.⁹

Newspapers too have experienced the pattern of concentrated ownership. Gannett Company, while also owning television media, holds a large number of newspapers and news magazines in its control. Many of these were acquired quietly, without public notice or discussion. Gannett's 2013 acquisition of publishing giant A.H. Belo Corporation caused some concern and news coverage, however. The sale would have allowed Gannett to own both an NBC and a CBS affiliate in St. Louis, Missouri, giving it control over programming and advertising rates for two competing stations. The U.S. Department of Justice required Gannett to sell the station owned by Belo to ensure market competition and multi-ownership in St. Louis.¹⁰

Link to Learning



If you are concerned about the lack of variety in the media and the market dominance of media conglomerates, the non-profit organization, **Free Press** (<https://openstaxcollege.org//29freepressnet>), tracks and promotes open communication.

These changes in the format and ownership of media raise the question whether the media still operate as an independent source of information. Is it possible that corporations and CEOs now control the information flow, making profit more important than the impartial delivery of information? The reality is that media outlets, whether newspaper, television, radio, or Internet, are businesses. They have expenses and must raise revenues. Yet at the same time, we expect the media to entertain, inform, and alert us without bias. They must provide some public services, while following laws and regulations. Reconciling these goals may not always be possible.

FUNCTIONS OF THE MEDIA

The media exist to fill a number of functions. Whether the medium is a newspaper, a radio, or a television newscast, a corporation behind the scenes must bring in revenue and pay for the cost of the product. Revenue comes from advertising and sponsors, like McDonald's, Ford Motor Company, and other large corporations. But corporations will not pay for advertising if there are no viewers or readers. So all programs and publications need to entertain, inform, or interest the public and maintain a steady stream of consumers. In the end, what attracts viewers and advertisers is what survives.

The media are also watchdogs of society and of public officials. Some refer to the media as the *fourth estate*, with the branches of government being the first three estates and the media equally participating as the fourth. This role helps maintain democracy and keeps the government accountable for its actions, even if a branch of the government is reluctant to open itself to public scrutiny. As much as social scientists would like citizens to be informed and involved in politics and events, the reality is that we are not. So the media, especially journalists, keep an eye on what is happening and sounds an alarm when the public needs to pay attention.¹¹

The media also engages in **agenda setting**, which is the act of choosing which issues or topics deserve public discussion. For example, in the early 1980s, famine in Ethiopia drew worldwide attention, which resulted in increased charitable giving to the country. Yet the famine had been going on for a long time before it was discovered by western media. Even after the discovery, it took video footage to gain the attention of the British and U.S. populations and start the aid flowing.¹² Today, numerous examples of agenda setting show how important the media are when trying to prevent further emergencies or humanitarian crises. In the spring of 2015, when the Dominican Republic was preparing to exile Haitians and undocumented (or under documented) residents, major U.S. news outlets remained silent. However, once the story had been covered several times by Al Jazeera, a state-funded broadcast company based in Qatar, ABC, the *New York Times*, and other network outlets followed.¹³ With major network coverage came public pressure for the U.S. government to act on behalf of the Haitians.¹⁴

Insider Perspective

Christiane Amanpour on “What Should Be News?”

The media are our connection to the world. Some events are too big to ignore, yet other events, such as the destruction of Middle Eastern monuments or the plight of foreign refugees, are far enough from our shores that they often go unnoticed. What we see is carefully selected, but who decides what should be news?

As the chief international correspondent for CNN, Christiane Amanpour is one media decision maker (**Figure 8.4**). Over the years, Amanpour has covered events around the world from war to genocide. In an interview with Oprah Winfrey, Amanpour explains that her duty, and that of other journalists, is to make a difference in the world. To do that, “we have to educate people and use the media responsibly.”¹⁵ Journalists cannot passively sit by and wait for stories to find them. “Words have consequences: the stories we decide to do, the stories we decide not to do . . . it all matters.”¹⁶



Figure 8.4 Christiane Amanpour accepts the award for the Association for International Broadcasting's Personality of the Year on November 4, 2015. (credit: AIB (Association for International Broadcasting))

As Amanpour points out, journalists are often “on the cutting edge of reform,” so if they fail to shed light on events, the results can be tragic. One of her biggest regrets was not covering the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, which cost nearly a million lives. She said the media ignored the event in favor of covering democratic elections in South Africa and a war in Bosnia, and ultimately she believes the media failed the people. “If we don’t respect our profession and we see it frittering away into the realm of triviality and sensationalism, we’ll

lose our standing,” she said. “That won’t be good for democracy. A thriving society must have a thriving press.”

This feeling of responsibility extends to covering moral topics, like genocide. Amanpour feels there shouldn’t be equal time given to all sides. “I’m not just a stenographer or someone with a megaphone; when I report, I have to do it in context, to be aware of the moral conundrum. . . . I have to be able to draw a line between victim and aggressor.”

Amanpour also believes the media should cover more. When given the full background and details of events, society pays attention to the news. “Individual Americans had an incredible reaction to the [2004 Indian Ocean] tsunami—much faster than their government’s reaction,” she said. “Americans are a very moral and compassionate people who believe in extending a helping hand, especially when they get the full facts instead of one-minute clips.” If the news fulfills its responsibility, as she sees it, the world can show its compassion and help promote freedom.

Why does Amanpour believe the press has a responsibility to report all that they see? Are there situations in which it is acceptable to display partiality in reporting the news? Why or why not?

Before the Internet, traditional media determined whether citizen photographs or video footage would become “news.” In 1991, a private citizen’s camcorder footage showed four police officers beating an African American motorist named Rodney King in Los Angeles. After appearing on local independent television station, KTLA-TV, and then the national news, the event began a national discussion on police brutality and ignited riots in Los Angeles.¹⁷ The agenda-setting power of traditional media has begun to be appropriated by social media and smartphones, however. Tumbler, Facebook, YouTube, and other Internet sites allow witnesses to instantly upload images and accounts of events and forward the link to friends. Some uploads go viral and attract the attention of the mainstream media, but large network newscasts and major newspapers are still more powerful at initiating or changing a discussion.

The media also promote the public good by offering a platform for public debate and improving citizen awareness. Network news informs the electorate about national issues, elections, and international news. The *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *NBC Nightly News*, and other outlets make sure voters can easily find out what issues affect the nation. Is terrorism on the rise? Is the dollar weakening? The network news hosts national debates during presidential elections, broadcasts major presidential addresses, and interviews political leaders during times of crisis. Cable news networks now provide coverage of all these topics as well.

Local news has a larger job, despite small budgets and fewer resources (**Figure 8.5**). Local government and local economic policy have a strong and immediate effect on citizens. Is the city government planning on changing property tax rates? Will the school district change the way Common Core tests are administered? When and where is the next town hall meeting or public forum to be held? Local and social media provide a forum for protest and discussion of issues that matter to the community.



Figure 8.5 Meetings of local governance, such as this meeting of the Independence City Council in Missouri, are rarely attended by more than gadflies and journalists. (credit: "MoBikeFed"/Flickr)

Link to Learning



Want a snapshot of local and state political and policy news? The magazine *Governing* (<https://openstaxcollege.org//129governing>) keeps an eye on what is happening in each state, offering articles and analysis on events that occur across the country.

While journalists reporting the news try to present information in an unbiased fashion, sometimes the public seeks opinion and analysis of complicated issues that affect various populations differently, like healthcare reform and the Affordable Care Act. This type of coverage may come in the form of editorials, commentaries, Op-Ed columns, and blogs. These forums allow the editorial staff and informed columnists to express a personal belief and attempt to persuade. If opinion writers are trusted by the public, they have influence.

Walter Cronkite, reporting from Vietnam, had a loyal following. In a broadcast following the Tet Offensive in 1968, Cronkite expressed concern that the United States was mired in a conflict that would end in a stalemate.¹⁸ His coverage was based on opinion after viewing the war from the ground.¹⁹ Although the number of people supporting the war had dwindled by this time, Cronkite's commentary bolstered opposition. Like editorials, commentaries contain opinion and are often written by specialists in a field. Larry Sabato, a prominent political science professor at the University of Virginia, occasionally writes his thoughts for the *New York Times*. These pieces are based on his expertise in politics and elections.²⁰ Blogs offer more personalized coverage, addressing specific concerns and perspectives for a limited group of readers. Nate Silver's blog, *FiveThirtyEight*, focuses on elections and politics.

8.2 The Evolution of the Media

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Discuss the history of major media formats
- Compare important changes in media types over time
- Explain how citizens learn political information from the media

The evolution of the media has been fraught with concerns and problems. Accusations of mind control, bias, and poor quality have been thrown at the media on a regular basis. Yet the growth of communications technology allows people today to find more information more easily than any previous generation. Mass media can be print, radio, television, or Internet news. They can be local, national, or international. They can be broad or limited in their focus. The choices are tremendous.

PRINT MEDIA

Early news was presented to local populations through the print press. While several colonies had printers and occasional newspapers, high literacy rates combined with the desire for self-government made Boston a perfect location for the creation of a newspaper, and the first continuous press was started there in 1704.²¹ 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 over the colonies. Newspapers took part in the effort to inform citizens of British misdeeds and incite attempts to revolt. Readership across the colonies increased to nearly forty thousand homes (among a total population of two million), and daily papers sprang up in large cities.²²

Although newspapers united for a common cause during the Revolutionary War, the divisions that occurred during the Constitutional Convention and the United States' early history created a change. The publication of the *Federalist Papers*, as well as the *Anti-Federalist Papers*, in the 1780s, moved the nation into the **party press era**, in which partisanship and political party loyalty dominated the choice of editorial content. One reason was cost. Subscriptions and advertisements did not fully cover printing costs, and political parties stepped in to support presses that aided the parties and their policies. Papers began printing party propaganda and messages, even publicly attacking political leaders like George Washington. Despite the antagonism of the press, Washington and several other founders felt that freedom of the press was important for creating an informed electorate. Indeed, freedom of the press is enshrined in the Bill of Rights in the first amendment.

Between 1830 and 1860, machines and manufacturing made the production of newspapers faster and less expensive. Benjamin Day's paper, the *New York Sun*, used technology like the linotype machine to mass-produce papers (**Figure 8.6**). Roads and waterways were expanded, decreasing the costs of distributing printed materials to subscribers. New newspapers popped up. The popular penny press papers and magazines contained more gossip than news, but they were affordable at a penny per issue. Over time, papers expanded their coverage to include racing, weather, and educational materials. By 1841, some news reporters considered themselves responsible for upholding high journalistic standards, and under the editor (and politician) Horace Greeley, the *New-York Tribune* became a nationally respected newspaper. By the end of the Civil War, more journalists and newspapers were aiming to meet professional standards of accuracy and impartiality.²³



(a)



(b)

Figure 8.6 Benjamin Day (a) founded the first U.S. penny press, *The Sun*, in 1833. *The Sun*, whose front page from November 26, 1834, is shown above (b), was a morning newspaper published in New York from 1833 to 1950.

Yet readers still wanted to be entertained. Joseph Pulitzer and the *New York World* gave them 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**. Ads sold quickly thanks to the paper’s popularity, and the Sunday edition became a regular feature of the newspaper. As the *New York World’s* circulation increased, other papers copied Pulitzer’s style in an effort to sell papers. Competition between newspapers led to increasingly sensationalized covers and crude issues.

In 1896, Adolph Ochs purchased the *New York Times* with the goal of creating a dignified newspaper that would provide readers with important news about the economy, politics, and the world rather than gossip and comics. The *New York Times* brought back the informational model, which exhibits impartiality and accuracy and promotes transparency in government and politics. With the arrival of the Progressive Era, the media began **muckraking**: the writing and publishing of news coverage that exposed corrupt business and government practices. Investigative work like Upton Sinclair’s serialized novel *The Jungle* led to changes in the way industrial workers were treated and local political machines were run. The Pure Food and Drug Act and other laws were passed to protect consumers and employees from unsafe food processing practices. Local and state government officials who participated in bribery and corruption became the centerpieces of exposés.

Some muckraking journalism still appears today, and the quicker movement of information through the system would seem to suggest an environment for yet more investigative work and the punch of exposés than in the past. However, at the same time there are fewer journalists being hired than there used to be. The scarcity of journalists and the lack of time to dig for details in a 24-hour, profit-oriented news model make investigative stories rare.²⁴ There are two potential concerns about the decline of investigative journalism in the digital age. First, one potential shortcoming is that the quality of news content will become uneven in depth and quality, which could lead to a less informed citizenry. Second, if investigative journalism in its systematic form declines, then the cases of wrongdoing that are the objects of such

investigations would have a greater chance of going on undetected.

In the twenty-first 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 2014.²⁵ Given the countless alternate forms of news, many of which are free, newspaper subscriptions have fallen. Advertising and especially classified ad revenue dipped. Many newspapers now maintain both a print and an 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.²⁶ Yet, overall, newspapers have adapted, becoming leaner—though less thorough and investigative—versions of their earlier selves.

RADIO

Radio news made its appearance in the 1920s. The National Broadcasting Company (NBC) and the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) began running sponsored news programs and radio dramas. Comedy programs, such as *Amos 'n' Andy*, *The Adventures of Gracie*, and *Easy Aces*, also became popular during the 1930s, as listeners were trying to find humor during the Depression (**Figure 8.7**). Talk shows, religious shows, and educational programs followed, and by the late 1930s, game shows and quiz shows were added to the airwaves. Almost 83 percent of households had a radio by 1940, and most tuned in regularly.²⁷

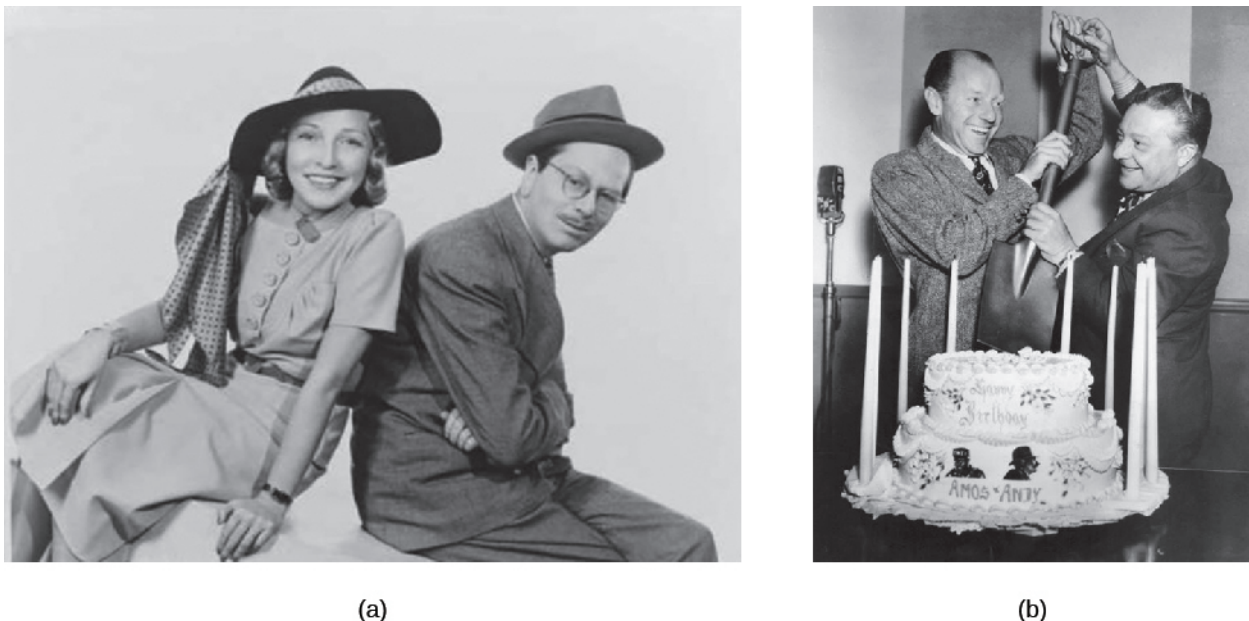


Figure 8.7 The “golden age of radio” included comedy shows like *Easy Aces*, starring Goodman and Jane Ace (a), and *Amos 'n' Andy*, starring Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll, shown here celebrating their program’s tenth anniversary in 1938 (b). These programs helped amuse families during the dark years of the Depression.

Not just something to be enjoyed by those in the city, the proliferation of the radio brought communications to rural America as well. News and entertainment programs were also targeted to rural communities. WLS in Chicago provided the *National Farm and Home Hour* and the *WLS Barn Dance*. WSM in Nashville began to broadcast the live music show called the *Grand Ole Opry*, which is still broadcast every week and is the longest live broadcast radio show in U.S. history.²⁸

As radio listenership grew, politicians realized that the medium offered a way to reach the public in a personal manner. Warren Harding was the first president to regularly give speeches over the radio.

President Herbert Hoover used radio as well, mainly to announce government programs on aid and unemployment relief.²⁹ Yet it was Franklin D. Roosevelt who became famous for harnessing the political power of radio. On entering office in March 1933, President Roosevelt needed to quiet public fears about the economy and prevent people from removing their money from the banks. He delivered his first radio speech eight days after assuming the presidency:

“My friends: I want to talk for a few minutes with the people of the United States about banking—to talk with the comparatively few who understand the mechanics of banking, but more particularly with the overwhelming majority of you who use banks for the making of deposits and the drawing of checks. I want to tell you what has been done in the last few days, and why it was done, and what the next steps are going to be.”³⁰

Roosevelt spoke directly to the people and addressed them as equals. One listener described the chats as soothing, with the president acting like a father, sitting in the room with the family, cutting through the political nonsense and describing what help he needed from each family member.³¹ Roosevelt would sit down and explain his ideas and actions directly to the people on a regular basis, confident that he could convince voters of their value.³² His speeches became known as “fireside chats” and formed an important way for him to promote his New Deal agenda (**Figure 8.8**). Roosevelt’s combination of persuasive rhetoric and the media allowed him to expand both the government and the presidency beyond their traditional roles.³³



(a)



(b)

Figure 8.8 As radio listenership became widespread in the 1930s (a), President Franklin D. Roosevelt took advantage of this new medium to broadcast his “fireside chats” and bring ordinary Americans into the president’s world (b). (credit a: modification of work by George W. Ackerman; credit b: modification of work by the Library of Congress)

During this time, print news still controlled much of the information flowing to the public. Radio news programs were limited in scope and number. But in the 1940s the German annexation of Austria, conflict in Europe, and World War II changed radio news forever. The need and desire for frequent news updates about the constantly evolving war made newspapers, with their once-a-day printing, too slow. People wanted to know what was happening, and they wanted to know immediately. Although initially reluctant to be on the air, reporter Edward R. Murrow of CBS began reporting live about Germany’s actions from his posts in Europe. His reporting contained news and some commentary, and even live coverage during Germany’s aerial bombing of London. To protect covert military operations during the war, the White House had placed guidelines on the reporting of classified information, making a legal exception to the First Amendment’s protection against government involvement in the press. Newscasters voluntarily agreed to suppress information, such as about the development of the atomic bomb and movements of the military, until after the events had occurred.³⁴

The number of professional and amateur radio stations grew quickly. Initially, the government exerted little legislative control over the industry. Stations chose their own broadcasting locations, signal strengths, and frequencies, which sometimes overlapped with one another or with the military, leading to tuning problems for listeners. The Radio Act (1927) created the Federal Radio Commission (FRC), which made the first effort to set standards, frequencies, and license stations. The Commission was under heavy pressure from Congress, however, and had little authority. The Communications Act of 1934 ended the FRC and created the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), which continued to work with radio stations to assign frequencies and set national standards, as well as oversee other forms of broadcasting and telephones. The FCC regulates interstate communications to this day. For example, it prohibits the use of certain profane words during certain hours on public airwaves.

Prior to WWII, radio frequencies were broadcast using amplitude modulation (AM). After WWII, frequency modulation (FM) broadcasting, with its wider signal bandwidth, provided clear sound with less static and became popular with stations wanting to broadcast speeches or music with high-quality sound. While radio's importance for distributing news waned with the increase in television usage, it remained popular for listening to music, educational talk shows, and sports broadcasting. Talk stations began to gain ground in the 1980s on both AM and FM frequencies, restoring radio's importance in politics. By the 1990s, talk shows had gone national, showcasing broadcasters like Rush Limbaugh and Don Imus.

In 1990, Sirius Satellite Radio began a campaign for FCC approval of satellite radio. The idea was to broadcast digital programming from satellites in orbit, eliminating the need for local towers. By 2001, two satellite stations had been approved for broadcasting. Satellite radio has greatly increased programming with many specialized offerings, such as channels dedicated to particular artists. It is generally subscription-based and offers a larger area of coverage, even to remote areas such as deserts and oceans. Satellite programming is also exempt from many of the FCC regulations that govern regular radio stations. Howard Stern, for example, was fined more than \$2 million while on public airwaves, mainly for his sexually explicit discussions.³⁵ Stern moved to Sirius Satellite in 2006 and has since been free of oversight and fines.

TELEVISION

Television combined the best attributes of radio and pictures and changed media forever. The first official broadcast in the United States was President Franklin Roosevelt's speech at the opening of the 1939 World's Fair in New York. The public did not immediately begin buying televisions, but coverage of World War II changed their minds. CBS reported on war events and included pictures and maps that enhanced the news for viewers. By the 1950s, the price of television sets had dropped, more television stations were being created, and advertisers were buying up spots.

As on the radio, quiz shows and games dominated the television airwaves. But when Edward R. Murrow made the move to television in 1951 with his news show *See It Now*, television journalism gained its foothold (**Figure 8.9**). As television programming expanded, more channels were added. Networks such as ABC, CBS, and NBC began nightly newscasts, and local stations and affiliates followed suit.



Figure 8.9 Edward R. Murrow's move to television increased the visibility of network news. In *The Challenge of Ideas* (1961) pictured above, Murrow discussed the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States alongside films stars such as John Wayne.

Even more than radio, television allows politicians to reach out and connect with citizens and voters in deeper ways. Before television, few voters were able to see a president or candidate speak or answer questions in an interview. Now everyone can decode body language and tone to decide whether candidates or politicians are sincere. Presidents can directly convey their anger, sorrow, or optimism during addresses.

The first television advertisements, run by presidential candidates Dwight D. Eisenhower and Adlai Stevenson in the early 1950s, were mainly radio jingles with animation or short question-and-answer sessions. In 1960, John F. Kennedy's campaign used a Hollywood-style approach to promote his image as young and vibrant. The Kennedy campaign ran interesting and engaging ads, featuring Kennedy, his wife Jacqueline, and everyday citizens who supported him.

Television was also useful to combat scandals and accusations of impropriety. Republican vice presidential candidate Richard Nixon used a televised speech in 1952 to address accusations that he had taken money from a political campaign fund illegally. Nixon laid out his finances, investments, and debts and ended by saying that the only election gift the family had received was a cocker spaniel the children named Checkers.³⁶ The "Checkers speech" was remembered more for humanizing Nixon than for proving he had not taken money from the campaign account. Yet it was enough to quiet accusations. Democratic vice presidential nominee Geraldine Ferraro similarly used television to answer accusations in 1984, holding a televised press conference to answer questions for over two hours about her husband's business dealings and tax returns.³⁷

In addition to television ads, the 1960 election also featured the first televised presidential debate. By that time most households had a television. Kennedy's careful grooming and practiced body language allowed viewers to focus on his presidential demeanor. His opponent, Richard Nixon, was still recovering from a severe case of the flu. While Nixon's substantive answers and debate skills made a favorable impression on radio listeners, viewers' reaction to his sweaty appearance and obvious discomfort demonstrated that live television had the potential to make or break a candidate.³⁸ In 1964, Lyndon B. Johnson was ahead in the polls, and he let Barry Goldwater's campaign know he did not want to debate.³⁹ Nixon, who ran for president again in 1968 and 1972, declined to debate. Then in 1976, President Gerald Ford, who was behind in the polls, invited Jimmy Carter to debate, and televised debates became a regular part of future presidential campaigns.⁴⁰

Link to Learning



Visit **American Rhetoric** (<https://openstaxcollege.org//29americanrhet>) for free access to speeches, video, and audio of famous presidential and political speeches.

Between the 1960s and the 1990s, presidents often used television to reach citizens and gain support for policies. When they made speeches, the networks and their local affiliates carried them. With few independent local stations available, a viewer had little alternative but to watch. During this “Golden Age of Presidential Television,” presidents had a strong command of the media.⁴¹

Some of the best examples of this power occurred when presidents used television to inspire and comfort the population during a national emergency. These speeches aided in the “rally ‘round the flag” phenomenon, which occurs when a population feels threatened and unites around the president.⁴² During these periods, presidents may receive heightened approval ratings, in part due to the media’s decision about what to cover.⁴³ In 1995, President Bill Clinton comforted and encouraged the families of the employees and children killed at the bombing of the Oklahoma City Federal Building. Clinton reminded the nation that children learn through action, and so we must speak up against violence and face evil acts with good acts.⁴⁴

Following the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington on September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush’s bullhorn speech from the rubble of Ground Zero in New York similarly became a rally. Bush spoke to the workers and first responders and encouraged them, but his short speech became a viral clip demonstrating the resilience of New Yorkers and the anger of a nation.⁴⁵ He told New Yorkers, the country, and the world that Americans could hear the frustration and anguish of New York, and that the terrorists would soon hear the United States (**Figure 8.10**).



(a)



(b)

Figure 8.10 Presidents Clinton and Bush were both called upon to calm the people after mass killings. In April 1996, President Bill Clinton and First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton lay flowers at the site of the former Alfred P. Murrah federal building just before the one-year anniversary of the Oklahoma City bombing (a). Three days after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 brought down the World Trade Center in New York City, George W. Bush declares to the crowd, “I can hear you! The rest of the world hears you! And the people . . . and the people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon!” (b)

Following their speeches, both presidents also received a bump in popularity. Clinton’s approval rating rose from 46 to 51 percent, and Bush’s from 51 to 90 percent.⁴⁶

NEW MEDIA TRENDS

The invention of cable in the 1980s and the expansion of the Internet in the 2000s opened up more options for media consumers than ever before. Viewers can watch nearly anything at the click of a button, bypass commercials, and record programs of interest. The resulting saturation, or inundation of information, may lead viewers to abandon the news entirely or become more suspicious and fatigued about politics.⁴⁷ This effect, in turn, also changes the president's ability to reach out to citizens. For example, viewership of the president's annual State of the Union address has decreased over the years, from sixty-seven million viewers in 1993 to thirty-two million in 2015.⁴⁸ Citizens who want to watch reality television and movies can easily avoid the news, leaving presidents with no sure way to communicate with the public.⁴⁹ Other voices, such as those of talk show hosts and political pundits, now fill the gap.

Electoral candidates have also lost some media ground. In *horse-race coverage*, modern journalists analyze campaigns and blunders or the overall race, rather than interviewing the candidates or discussing their issue positions. Some argue that this shallow coverage is a result of candidates' trying to control the journalists by limiting interviews and quotes. In an effort to regain control of the story, journalists begin analyzing campaigns without input from the candidates.⁵⁰ The use of social media by candidates provides a countervailing trend. President Trump's hundreds of election tweets are the stuff of legend. These tweets kept his press coverage up, although they also were problematic for him at times. The final days of the contest saw no new tweets from Trump as he attempted to stay on message.

Milestone

The First Social Media Candidate

When president-elect Barack Obama admitted an addiction to his Blackberry, the signs were clear: A new generation was assuming the presidency.⁵¹ Obama's use of technology was a part of life, not a campaign pretense. Perhaps for this reason, he was the first candidate to fully embrace social media.

While John McCain, the 2008 Republican presidential candidate, focused on traditional media to run his campaign, Obama did not. One of Obama's campaign advisors was Chris Hughes, a cofounder of Facebook. The campaign allowed Hughes to create a powerful online presence for Obama, with sites on YouTube, Facebook, MySpace, and more. Podcasts and videos were available for anyone looking for information about the candidate. These efforts made it possible for information to be forwarded easily between friends and colleagues. It also allowed Obama to connect with a younger generation that was often left out of politics.

By Election Day, Obama's skill with the web was clear: he had over two million Facebook supporters, while McCain had 600,000. Obama had 112,000 followers on Twitter, and McCain had only 4,600.⁵²

Are there any disadvantages to a presidential candidate's use of social media and the Internet for campaign purposes? Why or why not?

The availability of the Internet and social media has moved some control of the message back into the presidents' and candidates' hands. Politicians can now connect to the people directly, bypassing journalists. When Barack Obama's minister, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, was accused of making inflammatory racial sermons in 2008, Obama used YouTube to respond to charges that he shared Wright's beliefs. The video drew more than seven million views.⁵³ To reach out to supporters and voters, the White House maintains a YouTube channel and a Facebook site, as did the recent Republican Speaker of the House of Representatives, John Boehner.

Social media, like Facebook, also placed journalism in the hands of citizens: **citizen journalism** occurs when citizens use their personal recording devices and cell phones to capture events and post them on the Internet. In 2012, citizen journalists caught both presidential candidates by surprise. Mitt Romney was taped by a bartender's personal camera saying that 47 percent of Americans would vote for President

Obama because they were dependent on the government.⁵⁴ Obama was recorded by a *Huffington Post* volunteer saying that some Midwesterners “cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren’t like them” due to their frustration with the economy.⁵⁵ More recently, as Donald Trump was trying to close out the fall 2016 campaign, his musings about having his way with women were revealed on the infamous Billy Bush Access Hollywood tape. These statements became nightmares for the campaigns. As journalism continues to scale back and hire fewer professional writers in an effort to control costs, citizen journalism may become the new normal.⁵⁶

Another shift in the new media is a change in viewers’ preferred programming. Younger viewers, especially members of Generation X and Millennials, like their newscasts to be humorous. The popularity of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* demonstrate that news, even political news, can win young viewers if delivered well.⁵⁷ Such **soft news** presents news in an entertaining and approachable manner, painlessly introducing a variety of topics. While the depth or quality of reporting may be less than ideal, these shows can sound an alarm as needed to raise citizen awareness (**Figure 8.11**).⁵⁸



Figure 8.11 In June 2009, Stephen Colbert of *The Colbert Report* took his soft news show on the road, heading to Iraq for a week. During the first episode, Colbert interviewed Ray Odierno, commanding general of the coalition forces stationed in Iraq. (credit: The U.S. Army)

Viewers who watch or listen to programs like John Oliver’s *Last Week Tonight* are more likely to be aware and observant of political events and foreign policy crises than they would otherwise be.⁵⁹ They may view opposing party candidates more favorably because the low-partisan, friendly interview styles allow politicians to relax and be conversational rather than defensive.⁶⁰ Because viewers of political comedy shows watch the news frequently, they may, in fact, be more politically knowledgeable than citizens viewing national news. In two studies researchers interviewed respondents and asked knowledge questions about current events and situations. Viewers of *The Daily Show* scored more correct answers than viewers of news programming and news stations.⁶¹ That being said, it is not clear whether the number of viewers is large enough to make a big impact on politics, nor do we know whether the learning is long term or short term.⁶²

Get Connected!

Becoming a Citizen Journalist

Local government and politics need visibility. College students need a voice. Why not become a citizen journalist? City and county governments hold meetings on a regular basis and students rarely attend. Yet issues relevant to students are often discussed at these meetings, like increases in street parking fines, zoning for off-campus housing, and tax incentives for new businesses that employ part-time student labor. Attend some meetings, ask questions, and write about the experience on your Facebook page. Create a blog to organize your reports or use Storify to curate a social media debate. If you prefer videography, create a YouTube channel to document your reports on current events, or Tweet your live video using Periscope or Meerkat.

Not interested in government? Other areas of governance that affect students are the university or college's Board of Regents meetings. These cover topics like tuition increases, class cuts, and changes to student conduct policies. If your state requires state institutions to open their meetings to the public, consider attending. You might be the one to notify your peers of changes that affect them.

What local meetings could you cover? What issues are important to you and your peers?

8.3 Regulating the Media

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify circumstances in which the freedom of the press is not absolute
- Compare the ways in which the government oversees and influences media programming

The Constitution gives Congress responsibility for promoting the general welfare. While it is difficult to define what this broad dictate means, Congress has used it to protect citizens from media content it deems inappropriate. Although the media are independent participants in the U.S. political system, their liberties are not absolute and there are rules they must follow.

MEDIA AND THE FIRST AMENDMENT

The U.S. Constitution was written in secrecy. Journalists were neither invited to watch the drafting, nor did the framers talk to the press about their disagreements and decisions. Once it was finished, however, the Constitution was released to the public and almost all newspapers printed it. Newspaper editors also published commentary and opinion about the new document and the form of government it proposed. Early support for the Constitution was strong, and Anti-Federalists (who opposed it) argued that their concerns were not properly covered by the press. The eventual printing of *The Federalist Papers*, and the lesser-known *Anti-Federalist Papers*, fueled the argument that the press was vital to American democracy. It was also clear the press had the ability to affect public opinion and therefore public policy.⁶³

The approval of the First Amendment, as a part of the Bill of Rights, demonstrated the framers' belief that a free and vital press was important enough to protect. It said:

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.”

This amendment serves as the basis for the political freedoms of the United States, and freedom of the press plays a strong role in keeping democracy healthy. Without it, the press would not be free to alert

citizens to government abuses and corruption. In fact, one of New York's first newspapers, the *New York Weekly Journal*, began under John Peter Zenger in 1733 with the goal of routing corruption in the colonial government. After the colonial governor, William Cosby, had Zenger arrested and charged with seditious libel in 1735, his lawyers successfully defended his case and Zenger was found not guilty, affirming the importance of a free press in the colonies (**Figure 8.12**).



Figure 8.12 In defending John Peter Zenger against charges of libel against colonial governor William Cosby, Andrew Hamilton argued that a statement is not libelous if it can be proved. (credit: modification of work by the Library of Congress)

The media act as informants and messengers, providing the means for citizens to become informed and serving as a venue for citizens to announce plans to assemble and protest actions by their government. Yet the government must ensure the media are acting in good faith and not abusing their power. Like the other First Amendment liberties, freedom of the press is not absolute. The media have limitations on their freedom to publish and broadcast.

Slander and Libel

First, the media do not have the right to commit **slander**, speak false information with an intent to harm a person or entity, or **libel**, print false information with an intent to harm a person or entity. These acts constitute defamation of character that can cause a loss of reputation and income. The media do not have the right to free speech in cases of libel and slander because the information is known to be false. Yet on a weekly basis, newspapers and magazines print stories that are negative and harmful. How can they do this and not be sued?

First, libel and slander occur only in cases where false information is presented as fact. When editors or columnists write opinions, they are protected from many of the libel and slander provisions because they are not claiming their statements are facts. Second, it is up to the defamed individual or company to bring a lawsuit against the media outlet, and the courts have different standards depending on whether the claimant is a private or public figure. A public figure must show that the publisher or broadcaster acted in “reckless disregard” when submitting information as truth or that the author’s intent was malicious. This test goes back to the *New York Times v. Sullivan* (1964) case, in which a police commissioner in Alabama sued over inaccurate statements in a newspaper advertisement.⁶⁴ Because the commissioner was a public figure, the U.S. Supreme Court applied a stringent test of malice to determine whether the advertisement was libel; the court deemed it was not.

A private individual must make one of the above arguments or argue that the author was negligent in not making sure the information was accurate before publishing it. For this reason, newspapers and magazines are less likely to stray from hard facts when covering private individuals, yet they can be willing to stretch the facts when writing about politicians, celebrities, or public figures. But even stretching the truth can be costly for a publisher. In 2010, *Star* magazine published a headline, “Addiction Nightmare: Katie Drug Shocker,” leading readers to believe actress Katie Holmes was taking drugs. While the article in the magazine focuses on the addictive quality of Scientology sessions rather than drugs, the implication and the headline were different. Because drugs cause people to act erratically, directors might be less inclined to hire Holmes if she were addicted to drugs. Thus Holmes could argue that she had lost opportunity and income from the headline. While the publisher initially declined to correct the story, Holmes filed a \$50 million lawsuit, and *Star’s* parent company American Media, Inc. eventually settled. *Star* printed an apology and made a donation to a charity on Holmes’ behalf.⁶⁵

Classified Material

The media have only a limited right to publish material the government says is classified. If a newspaper or media outlet obtains classified material, or if a journalist is witness to information that is classified, the government may request certain material be redacted or removed from the article. In many instances, government officials and former employees give journalists classified paperwork in an effort to bring public awareness to a problem. If the journalist calls the White House or Pentagon for quotations on a classified topic, the president may order the newspaper to stop publication in the interest of national security. The courts are then asked to rule on what is censored and what can be printed.

The line between the people’s right to know and national security is not always clear. In 1971, the Supreme Court heard the Pentagon Papers case, in which the U.S. government sued the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* to stop the release of information from a classified study of the Vietnam War. The Supreme Court ruled that while the government can impose **prior restraint** on the media, meaning the government can prevent the publication of information, that right is very limited. The court gave the newspapers the right to publish much of the study, but revelation of troop movements and the names of undercover operatives are some of the few approved reasons for which the government can stop publication or reporting.

During the second Persian Gulf War, FOX News reporter Geraldo Rivera convinced the military to embed him with a U.S. Army unit in Iraq to provide live coverage of its day-to-day activities. During one of the reports he filed while traveling with the 101st Airborne Division, Rivera had his camera operator record him drawing a map in the sand, showing where his unit was and using Baghdad as a reference point. Rivera then discussed where the unit would go next. Rivera was immediately removed from the unit and escorted from Iraq.⁶⁶ The military exercised its right to maintain secrecy over troop movements, stating that Rivera’s reporting had given away troop locations and compromised the safety of the unit. Rivera’s future transmissions and reporting were censored until he was away from the unit.

MEDIA AND FCC REGULATIONS

The liberties enjoyed by newspapers are overseen by the U.S. court system, while television and radio broadcasters are monitored by both the courts and a government regulatory commission.

The Radio Act of 1927 was the first attempt by Congress to regulate broadcast materials. The act was written to organize the rapidly expanding number of radio stations and the overuse of frequencies. But politicians feared that broadcast material would be obscene or biased. The Radio Act thus contained language that gave the government control over the quality of programming sent over public airwaves, and the power to ensure that stations maintained the public’s best interest.⁶⁷

The Communications Act of 1934 replaced the Radio Act and created a more powerful entity to monitor the airwaves—a seven-member Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to oversee both radio and telephone communication. The FCC, which now has only five members (**Figure 8.13**), requires radio

stations to apply for licenses, granted only if stations follow rules about limiting advertising, providing a public forum for discussion, and serving local and minority communities. With the advent of television, the FCC was given the same authority to license and monitor television stations. The FCC now also enforces ownership limits to avoid monopolies and censors materials deemed inappropriate. It has no jurisdiction over print media, mainly because print media are purchased and not broadcast.



Figure 8.13 In November 2013, the leadership of the FCC included (from left to right) Ajit Pai, Mignon Clyburn, Chairman Tom Wheeler, Jessica Rosenworcel, and Michael O'Rielly. (credit: Federal Communications Commission)

Link to Learning



Concerned about something you heard or viewed? Would you like to file a complaint about an obscene radio program or place your phone number on the Do Not Call list? The **FCC** (<https://openstaxcollege.org//29fccgov>) oversees each of these.

To maintain a license, stations are required to meet a number of criteria. The **equal-time rule**, for instance, states that registered candidates running for office must be given equal opportunities for airtime and advertisements at non-cable television and radio stations beginning forty-five days before a primary election and sixty days before a general election. Should WBNS in Columbus, Ohio, agree to sell Senator Marco Rubio thirty seconds of airtime for a presidential campaign commercial, the station must also sell all other candidates in that race thirty seconds of airtime at the same price. This rate cannot be more than the station charges favored commercial advertisers that run ads of the same class and during the same time period.⁶⁸ More importantly, should Fox5 in Atlanta give Bernie Sanders five minutes of free airtime for an infomercial, the station must honor requests from all other candidates in the race for five minutes of free equal air time or a complaint may be filed with the FCC.⁶⁹ In 2015, Donald Trump, when he was running for the Republican presidential nomination, appeared on *Saturday Night Live*. Other Republican candidates made equal time requests, and NBC agreed to give each candidate twelve minutes and five seconds of air time on a Friday and Saturday night, as well as during a later episode of *Saturday Night Live*.⁷⁰

The FCC does waive the equal-time rule if the coverage is purely news. If a newscaster is covering a

political rally and is able to secure a short interview with a candidate, equal time does not apply. Likewise, if a news program creates a short documentary on the problem of immigration reform and chooses to include clips from only one or two candidates, the rule does not apply.⁷¹ But the rule may include shows that are not news. For this reason, some stations will not show a movie or television program if a candidate appears in it. In 2003, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Gary Coleman, both actors, became candidates in California's gubernatorial recall election. Television stations did not run Coleman's sitcom *Diff'rent Strokes* or Schwarzenegger's movies, because they would have been subject to the equal time provision. With 135 candidates on the official ballot, stations would have been hard-pressed to offer thirty-minute and two-hour time slots to all.⁷² Even the broadcasting of the president's State of the Union speech can trigger the equal-time provisions. Opposing parties in Congress now use their time immediately following the State of the Union to offer an official rebuttal to the president's proposals.⁷³

While the idea behind the equal-time rule is fairness, it may not apply beyond candidates to supporters of that candidate or of a cause. Hence, there potentially may be a loophole in which broadcasters can give free time to just one candidate's supporters. In the 2012 Wisconsin gubernatorial recall election, Scott Walker's supporters were allegedly given free air time to raise funds and ask for volunteers while opponent Tom Barrett's supporters were not.⁷⁴ According to someone involved in the case, the FCC declined to intervene after a complaint was filed on the matter, saying the equal-time rule applied only to the actual candidates, and that the case was an instance of the now-dead **fairness doctrine**.⁷⁵ The fairness doctrine was instituted in 1949 and required licensed stations to cover controversial issues in a balanced manner by providing listeners with information about all perspectives on any controversial issue. If one candidate, cause, or supporter was given an opportunity to reach the viewers or listeners, the other side was to be given a chance to present its side as well. The fairness doctrine ended in the 1980s, after a succession of court cases led to its repeal by the FCC in 1987, with stations and critics arguing the doctrine limited debate of controversial topics and placed the government in the role of editor.⁷⁶

The FCC also maintains **indecent regulations** over television, radio, and other broadcasters, which limit indecent material and keep the public airwaves free of obscene material.⁷⁷ While the Supreme Court has declined to define obscenity, it is identified using a test outlined in *Miller v. California* (1973).⁷⁸ Under the Miller test, obscenity is something that appeals to deviants, breaks local or state laws, and lacks value.⁷⁹ The Supreme Court determined that the presence of children in the audience trumped the right of broadcasters to air obscene and profane programming. However, broadcasters can show indecent programming or air profane language between the hours of 10 p.m. and 6 a.m.⁸⁰

The Supreme Court has also affirmed that the FCC has the authority to regulate content. When a George Carlin skit was aired on the radio with a warning that material might be offensive, the FCC still censored it. The station appealed the decision and lost.⁸¹ Fines can range from tens of thousands to millions of dollars, and many are levied for sexual jokes on radio talk shows and nudity on television. In 2004, Janet Jackson's wardrobe malfunction during the Super Bowl's half-time show cost the CBS network \$550,000.

While some FCC violations are witnessed directly by commission members, like Jackson's exposure at the Super Bowl, the FCC mainly relies on citizens and consumers to file complaints about violations of equal time and indecency rules. Approximately 2 percent of complaints to the FCC are about radio programming and 10 percent about television programming, compared to 71 percent about telephone complaints and 15 percent about Internet complaints.⁸² Yet what constitutes a violation is not always clear for citizens wishing to complain, nor is it clear what will lead to a fine or license revocation. In October 2014, parent advocacy groups and consumers filed complaints and called for the FCC to fine ABC for running a sexually charged opening scene in the drama *Scandal* immediately after *It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown*—without an ad or the cartoon's credits to act as a buffer between the very different types of programming.⁸³ The FCC did not fine ABC.

The Telecommunications Act of 1996 brought significant changes to the radio and television industries. It dropped the limit on the number of radio stations (forty) and television stations (twelve) a single company could own. It also allowed networks to purchase large numbers of cable stations. In essence, it reduced competition and increased the number of conglomerates. Some critics, such as Common Cause, argue

that the act also raised cable prices and made it easier for companies to neglect their public interest obligations.⁸⁴ The act also changed the role of the FCC from regulator to monitor. The Commission oversees the purchase of stations to avoid media monopolies and adjudicates consumer complaints against radio, television, and telephone companies.

Finding a Middle Ground

Watch Dog or Paparazzi?

We expect the media to keep a close eye on the government. But at what point does the media coverage cross from informational to sensational?

In 2012, former secretary of state Hillary Clinton was questioned about her department's decisions regarding the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya. The consulate had been bombed by militants, leading to the death of an ambassador and a senior service officer. It was clear the United States had some knowledge that there was a threat to the consulate, and officials wondered whether requests to increase security at the consulate had been ignored. Clinton was asked to appear before a House Select Committee to answer questions, and the media began its coverage. While some journalists limited their reporting to Benghazi, others did not. Clinton was hounded about everything from her illness (dubbed the "Benghazi-flu") to her clothing to her facial expressions to her choice of eyeglasses.⁸⁵ Even her hospital stay was questioned.⁸⁶ Some argued the expanded coverage was due to political attacks on Clinton, who at that time was widely perceived to be the top contender for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2016.⁸⁷ Republican majority leader Kevin McCarthy later implied that the hearings were an attempt to make Clinton look untrustworthy.⁸⁸ Yet Clinton was again brought before the House Select Committee on Benghazi as late as October 2015 (**Figure 8.14**).



Figure 8.14 On October 22, 2015, the House Select Committee on Benghazi listened to testimony from former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton for close to eleven hours.

This coverage should lead us to question whether the media gives us the information we need, or the information we want. Were people concerned about an attack on U.S. state officials working abroad, or did they just want to read rumors and attacks on Clinton? Did Republicans use the media's tendency to pursue a target as a way to hurt Clinton in the polls? If the media gives us what we want, the answer seems to be that we wanted the media to act as both watchdog and paparazzi.

How should the press have acted in this case if it were behaving only as the watchdog of democracy?

MEDIA AND TRANSPARENCY

The press has had some assistance in performing its muckraking duty. Laws that mandate federal and many state government proceedings and meeting documents be made available to the public are called **sunshine laws**. Proponents believe that open disagreements allow democracy to flourish and darkness allows corruption to occur. Opponents argue that some documents and policies are sensitive, and that the sunshine laws can inhibit policymaking.

While some documents may be classified due to national or state security, governments are encouraged to limit the over-classification of documents. The primary legal example for sunshine laws is the **Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)**, passed in 1966 and signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson. The act requires the executive branch of the U.S. government to provide information requested by citizens and was intended to increase openness in the executive branch, which had been criticized for hiding information. Citizens wishing to obtain information may request documents from the appropriate agencies, and agencies may charge fees if the collection and copying of the requested documentation requires time and labor.⁸⁹ FOIA also identifies data that does not need to be disclosed, such as human resource and medical records, national defense records, and material provided by confidential sources, to name a few.⁹⁰ Not all presidents have embraced this openness, however. President Ronald Reagan, in 1981, exempted the CIA and FBI from FOIA requests.⁹¹ Information requests have increased significantly in recent years, with U.S. agencies receiving over 700,000 requests in 2014, many directed to the Departments of State and Defense, thus creating a backlog.⁹²

Link to Learning



Want to request a government document but unsure where to start? If the agency is a part of the U.S. government, the **Freedom of Information Act** (<https://openstaxcollege.org//29foiagov>) portal will help you out.

Few people file requests for information because most assume the media will find and report on important problems. And many people, including the press, assume the government, including the White House, sufficiently answers questions and provides information about government actions and policies. This expectation is not new. During the Civil War, journalists expected to have access to those representing the government, including the military. But William Tecumseh Sherman, a Union general, maintained distance between the press and his military. Following the publication of material Sherman believed to be protected by government censorship, a journalist was arrested and nearly put to death. The event spurred the creation of accreditation for journalists, which meant a journalist must be approved to cover the White House and the military before entering a controlled area. All accredited journalists also need approval by military field commanders before coming near a military zone.⁹³

To cover war up close, more journalists are asking to travel with troops during armed conflict. In 2003, George W. Bush's administration decided to allow more journalists in the field, hoping the concession would reduce friction between the military and the press. The U.S. Department of Defense placed fifty-eight journalists in a media boot camp to prepare them to be embedded with military regiments in Iraq. Although the increase in embedded journalists resulted in substantial in-depth coverage, many journalists felt their colleagues performed poorly, acting as celebrities rather than reporters.⁹⁴

The line between journalists' expectation of openness and the government's willingness to be open has continued to be a point of contention. Some administrations use the media to increase public support during times of war, as Woodrow Wilson did in World War I. Other presidents limit the media in order to limit dissent. In 1990, during the first Persian Gulf War, journalists received all publication material from

the military in a prepackaged and staged manner. Access to Dover, the air force base that receives coffins of U.S. soldiers who die overseas, was closed. Journalists accused George H. W. Bush's administration of limiting access and forcing them to produce bad pieces. The White House believed it controlled the message.⁹⁵ The ban was later lifted.

In his 2008 presidential run, Barack Obama promised to run a transparent White House.⁹⁶ Yet once in office, he found that transparency makes it difficult to get work done, and so he limited access and questions. In his first year in office, George W. Bush, who was criticized by Obama as having a closed government, gave 147 question-and-answer sessions with journalists, while Obama gave only 46. Even Helen Thomas, a long-time liberal White House press correspondent, said the Obama administration tried to control both information and journalists (**Figure 8.15**).⁹⁷



Figure 8.15 President Barack Obama and White House correspondent Helen Thomas set aside their differences over transparency to enjoy cupcakes in honor of their shared birthday on August 4, 2009.

Because White House limitations on the press are not unusual, many journalists rely on confidential sources. In 1972, under the cloak of anonymity, the associate director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Mark Felt, became a news source for Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, political reporters at the *Washington Post*. Felt provided information about a number of potential stories and was Woodward's main source for information about President Richard Nixon's involvement in a series of illegal activities, including the break-in at Democratic Party headquarters in Washington's Watergate office complex. The information eventually led to Nixon's resignation and the indictment of sixty-nine people in his administration. Felt was nicknamed "Deep Throat," and the journalists kept his identity secret until 2005.⁹⁸

The practice of granting anonymity to sources is sometimes referred to as **reporter's privilege**. Fueled by the First Amendment's protection of the press, journalists have long offered to keep sources confidential to protect them from government prosecution. To illustrate, as part of the investigation into the outing of Valerie Plame as a CIA officer, *New York Times* reporter Judith Miller was jailed for refusing to reveal "Scooter" Libby, Vice President Dick Cheney's chief of staff, as her confidential government source.⁹⁹ Reporter's privilege has increased the number of instances in which whistleblowers and government employees have given journalists tips or documents to prompt investigation into questionable government practices. Edward Snowden's 2013 leak to the press regarding the U.S. government's massive internal surveillance and tapping program was one such case.

In 1972, however, the Supreme Court determined that journalists are not exempt from subpoenas and that courts could force testimony to name a confidential source. Journalists who conceal a source and thereby protect him or her from being properly tried for a crime may spend time in jail for contempt of court. In the case of *Branzburg v. Hayes* (1972), three journalists were placed in contempt of court for refusing to divulge sources.¹⁰⁰ The journalists appealed to the Supreme Court. In a 5–4 decision, the justices determined that freedom of the press did not extend to the confidentiality of sources. A concurring opinion did state that

the case should be seen as a limited ruling, however. If the government needed to know a source due to a criminal trial, it could pursue the name of that source.¹⁰¹

More recently, the Supreme Court refused to hear an appeal from *New York Times* journalist James Risen, who was subpoenaed and ordered to name a confidential source who had provided details about a U.S. government mission designed to harm Iran's nuclear arms program. Risen was finally released from the subpoena, but the battle took seven years and the government eventually collected enough other evidence to make his testimony less crucial to the case.¹⁰² Overall, the transparency of the government is affected more by the executive currently holding office than by the First Amendment.

8.4 The Impact of the Media

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify forms of bias that exist in news coverage and ways the media can present biased coverage
 - Explain how the media cover politics and issues
 - Evaluate the impact of the media on politics and policymaking
-

In what ways can the media affect society and government? The media's primary duty is to present us with information and alert us when important events occur. This information may affect what we think and the actions we take. The media can also place pressure on government to act by signaling a need for intervention or showing that citizens want change. For these reasons, the quality of the media's coverage matters.

MEDIA EFFECTS AND BIAS

Concerns about the effects of media on consumers and the existence and extent of media bias go back to the 1920s. Reporter and commentator Walter Lippmann noted that citizens have limited personal experience with government and the world and posited that the media, through their stories, place ideas in citizens' minds. These ideas become part of the citizens' frame of reference and affect their decisions. Lippmann's statements led to the **hypodermic theory**, which argues that information is "shot" into the receiver's mind and readily accepted.¹⁰³

Yet studies in the 1930s and 1940s found that information was transmitted in two steps, with one person reading the news and then sharing the information with friends. People listened to their friends, but not to those with whom they disagreed. The newspaper's effect was thus diminished through conversation. This discovery led to the **minimal effects theory**, which argues the media have little effect on citizens and voters.¹⁰⁴ By the 1970s, a new idea, the **cultivation theory**, hypothesized that media develop a person's view of the world by presenting a perceived reality.¹⁰⁵ What we see on a regular basis is our reality. Media can then set norms for readers and viewers by choosing what is covered or discussed.

In the end, the consensus among observers is that media have some effect, even if the effect is subtle. This raises the question of how the media, even general newscasts, can affect citizens. One of the ways 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.

Episodic framing occurs when a story focuses on isolated details or specifics rather than looking broadly at a whole issue. *Thematic framing* takes a broad look at an issue and skips numbers or details. It looks at how the issue has changed over a long period of time and what has led to it. For example, a large, urban city is dealing with the problem of an increasing homeless population, and the city has suggested ways to improve the situation. If journalists focus on the immediate statistics, report the current percentage

of homeless people, interview a few, and look at the city's current investment in a homeless shelter, the coverage is episodic. If they look at homelessness as a problem increasing everywhere, examine the reasons people become homeless, and discuss the trends in cities' attempts to solve the problem, the coverage is thematic. Episodic frames may create more sympathy, while a thematic frame may leave the reader or viewer emotionally disconnected and less sympathetic (**Figure 8.16**).



Figure 8.16 Civil war in Syria has led many to flee the country, including this woman living in a Syrian refugee camp in Jordan in September 2015. Episodic framing of the stories of Syrian refugees, and their deaths, turned government inaction into action. (credit: Enes Reyhan)

Link to Learning



For a closer look at framing and how it influences voters, read **“How the Media Frames Political Issues”** (<https://openstaxcollege.org//29scotlondoness>), a review essay by Scott London.

Framing can also affect the way we see race, socioeconomic, or other generalizations. For this reason, it is linked to **priming**: when media coverage predisposes the viewer or reader to a particular perspective on a subject or issue. If a newspaper article focuses on unemployment, struggling industries, and jobs moving overseas, the reader will have a negative opinion about the economy. If then asked whether he or she approves of the president's job performance, the reader is primed to say no. Readers and viewers are able to fight priming effects if they are aware of them or have prior information about the subject.

COVERAGE EFFECTS ON GOVERNANCE AND CAMPAIGNS

When it is spotty, the media's coverage of campaigns and government can sometimes affect the way government operates and the success of candidates. In 1972, for instance, the McGovern-Fraser reforms created a voter-controlled primary system, so party leaders no longer pick the presidential candidates.

Now the media are seen as kingmakers and play a strong role in influencing who will become the Democratic and Republican nominees in presidential elections. They can discuss the candidates' messages, vet their credentials, carry sound bites of their speeches, and conduct interviews. The candidates with the most media coverage build momentum and do well in the first few primaries and caucuses. This, in turn, leads to more media coverage, more momentum, and eventually a winning candidate. Thus, candidates need the media.

In the 1980s, campaigns learned that tight control on candidate information created more favorable media coverage. In the presidential election of 1984, candidates Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush began using an issue-of-the-day strategy, providing quotes and material on only one topic each day. This strategy limited what journalists could cover because they had only limited quotes and sound bites to use in their reports. In 1992, both Bush's and Bill Clinton's campaigns maintained their carefully drawn candidate images by also limiting photographers and television journalists to photo opportunities at rallies and campaign venues. The constant control of the media became known as the "bubble," and journalists were less effective when they were in the campaign's bubble. Reporters complained this coverage was campaign advertising rather than journalism, and a new model emerged with the 1996 election.¹⁰⁶

Campaign coverage now focuses on the spectacle of the season, rather than providing information about the candidates. Colorful personalities, strange comments, lapse of memories, and embarrassing revelations are more likely to get air time than the candidates' issue positions. Donald Trump may be the best example of shallower press coverage of a presidential election. Some argue that newspapers and news programs are limiting the space they allot to discussion of the campaigns.¹⁰⁷ Others argue that citizens want to see updates on the race and electoral drama, not boring issue positions or substantive reporting.¹⁰⁸ It may also be that journalists have tired of the information games played by politicians and have taken back control of the news cycles.¹⁰⁹ All these factors have likely led to the shallow press coverage we see today, sometimes dubbed *pack journalism* because journalists follow one another rather than digging for their own stories. Television news discusses the strategies and blunders of the election, with colorful examples. Newspapers focus on polls. In an analysis of the 2012 election, Pew Research found that 64 percent of stories and coverage focused on campaign strategy. Only 9 percent covered domestic issue positions; 6 percent covered the candidates' public records; and, 1 percent covered their foreign policy positions.¹¹⁰

For better or worse, coverage of the candidates' statements get less air time on radio and television, and sound bites, or clips, of their speeches have become even shorter. In 1968, the average sound bite from Richard Nixon was 42.3 seconds, while a recent study of television coverage found that sound bites had decreased to only eight seconds in the 2004 election.¹¹¹ The clips chosen to air were attacks on opponents 40 percent of the time. Only 30 percent contained information about the candidate's issues or events. The study also found the news showed images of the candidates, but for an average of only twenty-five seconds while the newscaster discussed the stories.¹¹²

This study supports the argument that shrinking sound bites are a way for journalists to control the story and add their own analysis rather than just report on it.¹¹³ Candidates are given a few minutes to try to argue their side of an issue, but some say television focuses on the argument rather than on information. In 2004, Jon Stewart of Comedy Central's *The Daily Show* began attacking the CNN program *Crossfire* for being theater, saying the hosts engaged in reactionary and partisan arguing rather than true debating.¹¹⁴ Some of Stewart's criticisms resonated, even with host Paul Begala, and *Crossfire* was later pulled from the air.¹¹⁵

The media's discussion of campaigns has also grown negative. Although biased campaign coverage dates back to the period of the partisan press, 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, seventy-one of seventy-four MSNBC stories about Mitt Romney were highly negative, while FOX News' coverage of Obama had forty-six out of fifty-two stories with negative information (**Figure 8.17**). The major networks—ABC, CBS, and NBC—were somewhat more balanced, yet the overall coverage of both candidates tended to be negative.¹¹⁶

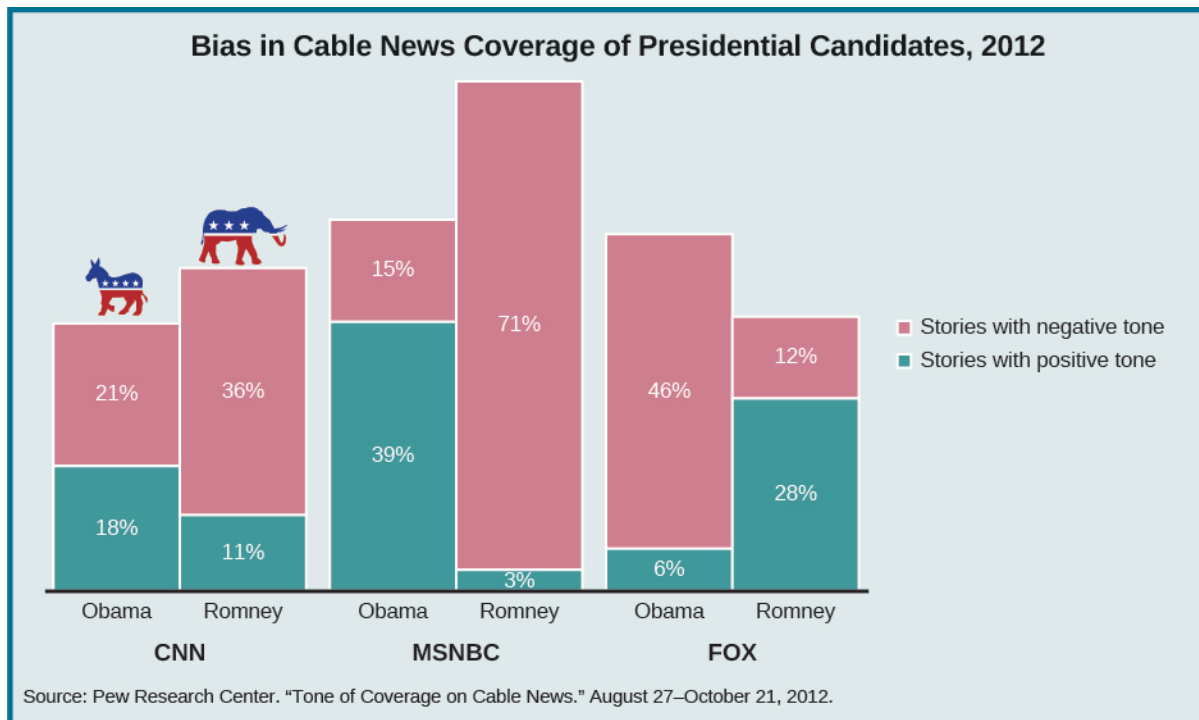


Figure 8.17 Media coverage of campaigns is increasingly negative, with cable news stations demonstrating more bias in their framing of stories during the 2012 campaign.

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 pages and try to spread news through supporters to the undecided. 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, while his coverage in Facebook news was negative 62 percent of the time and 58 percent of the time on Twitter.¹¹⁷ 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 topics and at one point was even drawn into a Twitter battle with Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-MA). Hillary Clinton also used Facebook for longer messages and imaging.

Once candidates are in office, the chore of governing begins, with the added weight of media attention. Historically, if presidents were unhappy with their press coverage, they used personal and professional means to change its tone. Franklin D. Roosevelt, for example, was able to keep journalists from printing stories through gentleman's agreements, loyalty, and the provision of additional information, sometimes off the record. The journalists then wrote positive stories, hoping to keep the president as a source. John F. Kennedy hosted press conferences twice a month and opened the floor for questions from journalists, in an effort to keep press coverage positive.¹¹⁸

When presidents and other members of the White House are not forthcoming with information, journalists must press for answers. Dan Rather, a journalist for CBS, regularly sparred with presidents in an effort to get information. When Rather interviewed Richard Nixon about Vietnam and Watergate, Nixon was hostile and uncomfortable.¹¹⁹ In a 1988 interview with then-vice president George H. W. Bush, Bush accused Rather of being argumentative about the possible cover-up of a secret arms sale with Iran:

Rather: I don't want to be argumentative, Mr. Vice President.

Bush: You do, Dan.

Rather: No—no, sir, I don't.

Bush: This is not a great night, because I want to talk about why I want to be president, why those 41 percent of the people are supporting me. And I don't think it's fair to judge my whole career by a rehash of Iran. How would you like it if I judged your career by those seven minutes when you walked off the set in New York?¹²⁰

Cabinet secretaries and other appointees also talk with the press, sometimes making for conflicting messages. The creation of the position of press secretary and the White House Office of Communications both stemmed from the need to send a cohesive message from the executive branch. Currently, the White House controls the information coming from the executive branch through the Office of Communications and decides who will meet with the press and what information will be given.

But stories about the president often examine personality, or the president's ability to lead the country, deal with Congress, or respond to national and international events. They are less likely to cover the president's policies or agendas without a lot of effort on the president's behalf.¹²¹ When Obama first entered office in 2009, journalists focused on his battles with Congress, critiquing his leadership style and inability to work with Representative Nancy Pelosi, then Speaker of the House. To gain attention for his policies, specifically the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), Obama began traveling the United States to draw the media away from Congress and encourage discussion of his economic stimulus package. Once the ARRA had been passed, Obama began travelling again, speaking locally about why the country needed the Affordable Care Act and guiding media coverage to promote support for the act.¹²²

Congressional representatives have a harder time attracting media attention for their policies. House and Senate members who use the media well, either to help their party or to show expertise in an area, may increase their power within Congress, which helps them bargain for fellow legislators' votes. Senators and high-ranking House members may also be invited to appear on cable news programs as guests, where they may gain some media support for their policies. Yet, overall, because there are so many members of Congress, and therefore so many agendas, it is harder for individual representatives to draw media coverage.¹²³

It is less clear, however, whether media coverage of an issue leads Congress to make policy, or whether congressional policymaking leads the media to cover policy. In the 1970s, Congress investigated ways to stem the number of drug-induced deaths and crimes. As congressional meetings dramatically increased, the press was slow to cover the topic. The number of hearings was at its highest from 1970 to 1982, yet media coverage did not rise to the same level until 1984.¹²⁴ Subsequent hearings and coverage led to national policies like DARE and First Lady Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" campaign (**Figure 8.18**).



Figure 8.18 First Lady Nancy Reagan speaks at a “Just Say No” rally in Los Angeles on May 13, 1987 (a). The Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.) is an anti-drug, anti-gang program founded in 1983 by a joint initiative of the Los Angeles Police Department and the Los Angeles Unified School District.

Later studies of the media’s effect on both the president and Congress report that the media has a stronger agenda-setting effect on the president than on Congress. What the media choose to cover affects what the president thinks is important to voters, and these issues were often of national importance. The media’s effect on Congress was limited, however, and mostly extended to local issues like education or child and elder abuse.¹²⁵ If the media are discussing a topic, chances are a member of Congress has already submitted a relevant bill, and it is waiting in committee.

COVERAGE EFFECTS ON SOCIETY

The media choose what they want to discuss. This agenda setting creates a reality for voters and politicians that affects the way people think, act, and vote. Even if the crime rate is going down, for instance, citizens accustomed to reading stories about assault and other offenses still perceive crime to be an issue.¹²⁶ Studies have also found that the media’s portrayal of race is flawed, especially in coverage of crime and poverty. One study revealed that local news shows were more likely to show pictures of criminals when they were African American, so they overrepresented blacks as perpetrators and whites as victims.¹²⁷ A second study found a similar pattern in which Latinos were underrepresented as victims of crime and as police officers, while whites were overrepresented as both.¹²⁸ Voters were thus more likely to assume that most criminals are black and most victims and police officers are white, even though the numbers do not support those assumptions.

Network news similarly misrepresents the victims of poverty by using more images of blacks than whites in its segments. Viewers in a study were left believing African Americans were the majority of the unemployed and poor, rather than seeing the problem as one faced by many races.¹²⁹ The misrepresentation of race is not limited to news coverage, however. A study of images printed in national magazines, like *Time* and *Newsweek*, found they also misrepresented race and poverty. The magazines were more likely to show images of young African Americans when discussing poverty and excluded the elderly and the young, as well as whites and Latinos, which is the true picture of poverty.¹³⁰

Racial framing, even if unintentional, affects perceptions and policies. If viewers are continually presented with images of African Americans as criminals, there is an increased chance they will perceive members of this group as violent or aggressive.¹³¹ The perception that most recipients of welfare are working-age African Americans may have led some citizens to vote for candidates who promised to reduce welfare benefits.¹³² When survey respondents were shown a story of a white unemployed individual, 71 percent listed unemployment as one of the top three problems facing the United States, while only 53 percent did so if the story was about an unemployed African American.¹³³

Word choice may also have a priming effect. News organizations like the *Los Angeles Times* and the Associated Press no longer use the phrase “illegal immigrant” to describe undocumented residents. This may be due to the desire to create a “sympathetic” frame for the immigration situation rather than a “threat” frame.¹³⁴

Media coverage of women has been similarly biased. Most journalists in the early 1900s were male, and women’s issues were not part of the newsroom discussion. As journalist Kay Mills put it, the women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s was about raising awareness of the problems of equality, but writing about rallies “was like trying to nail Jell-O to the wall.”¹³⁵ Most politicians, business leaders, and other authority figures were male, and editors’ reactions to the stories were lukewarm. The lack of women in the newsroom, politics, and corporate leadership encouraged silence.¹³⁶

In 1976, journalist Barbara Walters became the first female coanchor on a network news show, *The ABC Evening News*. She was met with great hostility from her coanchor Harry Reasoner and received critical coverage from the press.¹³⁷ On newspaper staffs, women reported having to fight for assignments to well-published **beats**, or to be assigned areas or topics, such as the economy or politics, that were normally reserved for male journalists. Once female journalists held these assignments, they feared writing about women’s issues. Would it make them appear weak? Would they be taken from their coveted beats?¹³⁸ This apprehension allowed poor coverage of women and the women’s movement to continue until women were better represented as journalists and as editors. Strength of numbers allowed them to be confident when covering issues like health care, childcare, and education.¹³⁹

Link to Learning



The **Center for American Women in Politics** (<https://openstaxcollege.org//29cawprutgers>) researches the treatment women receive from both government and the media, and they share the data with the public.

The media’s historically uneven coverage of women continues in its treatment of female candidates. Early coverage was sparse. The stories that did appear often discussed the candidate’s viability, or ability to win, rather than her stand on the issues.¹⁴⁰ Women were seen as a novelty rather than as serious contenders who needed to be vetted and discussed. Modern media coverage has changed slightly. One study found that female candidates receive more favorable coverage than in prior generations, especially if they are incumbents.¹⁴¹ Yet a different study found that while there was increased coverage for female candidates, it was often negative.¹⁴² And it did not include Latina candidates.¹⁴³ Without coverage, they are less likely to win.

The historically negative media coverage of female candidates has had another concrete effect: Women are less likely than men to run for office. One common reason is the effect negative media coverage has on families.¹⁴⁴ Many women do not wish to expose their children or spouses to criticism.¹⁴⁵ In 2008, the nomination of Sarah Palin as Republican candidate John McCain’s running mate validated this concern (**Figure 8.19**). Some articles focused on her qualifications to be a potential future president or her record on the issues. But others questioned whether she had the right to run for office, given she had young children, one of whom has developmental disabilities.¹⁴⁶ Her daughter, Bristol, was criticized for becoming pregnant while unmarried.¹⁴⁷ Her husband was called cheap for failing to buy her a high-priced wedding ring.¹⁴⁸ Even when candidates ask that children and families be off-limits, the press rarely honors the requests. So women with young children may wait until their children are grown before running for office, if they choose to run at all.



Figure 8.19 When Sarah Palin found herself on the national stage at the Republican Convention in September 2008, media coverage about her selection as John McCain's running mate included numerous questions about her ability to serve based on personal family history. Attacks on candidates' families lead many women to postpone or avoid running for office. (credit: Carol Highsmith)

Key Terms

agenda setting the media's ability to choose which issues or topics get attention

beat the coverage area assigned to journalists for news or stories

citizen journalism video and print news posted to the Internet or social media by citizens rather than the news media

cultivation theory the idea that media affect a citizen's worldview through the information presented

digital paywall the need for a paid subscription to access published online material

equal-time rule an FCC policy that all candidates running for office must be given the same radio and television airtime opportunities

fairness doctrine a 1949 Federal Communications Commission (FCC) policy, now defunct, that required holders of broadcast licenses to cover controversial issues in a balanced manner

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

Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) a federal statute that requires public agencies to provide certain types of information requested by citizens

hypodermic theory the idea that information is placed in a citizen's brain and accepted

indecent regulations laws that limit indecent and obscene material on public airwaves

libel printed information about a person or organization that is not true and harms the reputation of the person or organization

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

minimal effects theory the idea that the media have little effect on citizens

muckraking news coverage focusing on exposing corrupt business and government practices

party press era period during the 1780s in which newspaper content was biased by political partisanship

priming the process of predisposing readers or viewers to think a particular way

prior restraint a government action that stops someone from doing something before they are able to do it (e.g., forbidding someone to publish a book he or she plans to release)

public relations biased communication intended to improve the image of people, companies, or organizations

reporter's privilege the right of a journalist to keep a source confidential

slander spoken information about a person or organization that is not true and harms the reputation of the person or organization

soft news news presented in an entertaining style

sunshine laws laws that require government documents and proceedings to be made public

yellow journalism sensationalized coverage of scandals and human interest stories

Summary

8.1 What Is the Media?

The media encompass all communications that transmit facts or information to citizens and includes the mass media in print and on the radio, television, and Internet. Television takes many forms, such as local, network, cable, or satellite. Historically, programming was transmitted from networks to local stations and broadcast via the airwaves, while fiber-optic cables now allow for national programming to transmit directly. Technological advances allow on-demand and streaming access for programming, leading to changes in advertising and scheduling practices. Conglomerates are large media corporations that own many stations and other companies; therefore, they can create a monopoly and decrease the flow of information to the public. The media serves to entertain the public, watch for corruption, set the national agenda, and promote the public good. In each of these roles, the media informs the public about what is happening and signals when citizens should act.

8.2 The Evolution of the Media

Newspapers were vital during the Revolutionary War. Later, in the party press era, party loyalty governed coverage. At the turn of the twentieth century, investigative journalism and muckraking appeared, and newspapers began presenting more professional, unbiased information. The modern print media have fought to stay relevant and cost-efficient, moving online to do so.

Most families had radios by the 1930s, making it an effective way for politicians, especially presidents, to reach out to citizens. While the increased use of television decreased the popularity of radio, talk radio still provides political information. Modern presidents also use television to rally people in times of crisis, although social media and the Internet now offer a more direct way for them to communicate. While serious newscasts still exist, younger viewers prefer soft news as a way to become informed.

8.3 Regulating the Media

While freedom of the press is an important aspect of the Bill of Rights, this freedom is not absolute and may be regulated by the U.S. government. The press cannot libel or slander individuals or publish information about troop movements or undercover operatives. The Federal Communications Commission can enforce limits on television and radio programming by fining or revoking licenses. Broadcast material cannot be obscene, and indecent programs can be broadcast only between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m. Stations must also give political candidates equal time for advertising and interviews.

The media help governments maintain transparency. Sunshine laws require some governments and government agencies to make meeting documents public. Some presidents have encouraged journalists and allowed questioning while others have avoided the press. Lack of openness by government officials leads journalists to use confidential sources for important or classified information. The Supreme Court does not give the press complete freedom to keep sources confidential, though the government can choose whom it prosecutes for hiding sources.

8.4 The Impact of the Media

Writers began to formally study media bias in the 1920s. Initially, the press was seen as being able to place information in our minds, but later research found that the media have a minimal effect on recipients. A more recent theory is that the media cultivates our reality by presenting information that creates our perceptions of the world. The media does have the ability to frame what it presents, and it can also prime citizens to think a particular way, which changes how they react to new information.

The media's coverage of electoral candidates has increasingly become analysis rather than reporting. Sound bites from candidates are shorter. The press now provides horse-race coverage on the campaigns rather than in-depth coverage on candidates and their positions, forcing voters to look for other sources, like social media, for information. Current coverage of the government focuses more on what the president does than on presidential policies. Congress, on the other hand, is rarely affected by the media. Most topics discussed by the media are already being discussed by members of Congress or its committees.