

Media Purpose and Structure

PART

1

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Media Power and Government Control

Learning Objectives

1. Summarize the political importance of the mass media in the United States (U.S.).
2. Describe the major functions mass media serve and why they are important in a democratic society.
3. Examine why ownership and control of the media are uniquely important in democratic systems for shaping the news content we see.
4. Explain the various models of news making, the theories underlying them, and how they shape our news coverage.

Perhaps more than any other contemporary example, Donald Trump's presidency highlights both the power and failures of mass media in American politics. From the earliest days of the 2016 primary season—when he earned more air time than all other Republican contenders, time worth millions in paid ad dollars—all the way through the aftermath of his electoral defeat in 2020, Trump thoroughly dominated American press coverage.

During the 2016 primaries, candidate Trump captured press attention at levels normally reserved for candidates leading in the polls, and media fascination is widely blamed/credited for Trump's eventual primary win. Even with very little money raised and no political base, Trump effectively worked the media as a free platform for his message and a chance to build a following. According to Thomas E. Patterson, "Trump is arguably the first bona fide media-created presidential nominee. Although he subsequently tapped a political nerve, journalists fueled his launch."¹ Even as the Trump phenomenon illustrates the importance of the press in presidential primaries,

his dominance in press coverage and the tumult of the press–presidential relationship during his presidency highlights the limitations of our press system. Press fascination with Trump reflects the market-driven nature of the U.S. press, which prioritizes news values over political values. Coverage of politics is determined by what is timely, novel, and sensational—focusing on the aspects of politics that capture and hold the attention of mass audiences.

Press coverage of Trump reflects the news values of many journalists and news organizations. From the outset of the pre-primary season in 2016, the press intuited that his outspoken and unconventional style would draw audiences of unprecedented proportions, and they were not wrong. The 2016 primaries were a ratings boom for the cable news networks, one that persisted through Trump's term in office.² In September 2016, CNN reported its best ratings quarter in eight years,³ and it charged forty times its normal rate for advertising spots during the Republican primary debates. The wealth was spread across cable news networks—the average cost of ad spots during the ten primary debates between August and January was exponentially higher than the historical average of a CNN prime-time ad spot.⁴

In 2016, general election coverage of both candidates was decidedly negative, but Trump leveraged the press's penchant for novelty and sensationalism to command three times the coverage earned by former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton—much of which was comprised of excerpts from speeches delivered in his own words. Meanwhile, over the course of the entire campaign, negative coverage of Hillary Clinton nearly doubled that of her positive coverage. An additional press problem for Hillary Clinton was that the focus of coverage did not play to her strengths as a candidate. Only 3% of campaign stories focused on leadership or experience, and only 10% of stories examined the policy stances of the candidates. A majority of coverage focused on the horserace (42%) and controversies (17%).⁵

Press fascination with Trump remained in place during his entire term and through the 2020 election and its aftermath. Trump's press dominance was clear in coverage of the general election campaign, and this pattern was not limited to coverage from conservative news outlets. Though the Fox News ratio of aired Trump-to-Biden statements approached 60:40; CBS's Trump-to-Biden ratio was closer to 70:30. These figures reflect the peak of Biden's election coverage; during earlier phases of the campaign, he received hardly any press attention. In coverage spanning the entire general election campaign, Trump earned four times the coverage of Biden on CBS and three times as much on Fox.⁶

The failures of the press during the Trump era are not about advantaging one candidate over the other; the problems stem from the fact that the choices journalists make about what to cover are driven by ratings and audiences, often with little regard for broader societal ramifications. Trump often boasted about his ability to dominate the headlines by sending a single tweet, regardless of whatever reporting is interrupted in response. News values stressing the entertaining and sensational breed superficial and negative campaign news coverage that does not speak to issues of governance. Given the importance of the press for democratic governance, media watchers are increasingly concerned that these trends encourage a brand of politics based on personality, negativity, and style over civility and policy substance.

Political Importance of Mass Media

Tales from recent presidential elections illustrate how mass media reports, in combination with other political factors, shape the views of citizens about public policies and public officials.⁷ News stories take millions of Americans, in all walks of life, to the political and military battlefields of the world. They give them ringside seats for presidential inaugurations and basketball championships. They allow the public to share political experiences, such as watching political debates and congressional investigations. These experiences then undergird public opinions and political actions.⁸

Mass media often serve as attitude and behavior models. The images that media create suggest which views and behaviors are acceptable and even praiseworthy and which are outside the mainstream. Audiences can learn how to conduct themselves at home and at work, how to cope with crises, and how to evaluate social institutions such as the medical profession and grocery chains. The mass media also are powerful guardians of proper political behavior because Americans believe that the press should inform them about government wrongdoing. Media stories indicate what different groups deem important or unimportant, what conforms to prevailing standards of justice and morality, and how events are related to each other. In the process, the media set forth cultural values that their audiences are likely to accept in whole or in part as typical of U.S. society. The media thus help to integrate and homogenize our society.

Media images are especially potent when they involve aspects of life that people experience only through the media. The personal and

professional conduct of politicians, political events beyond hometown boundaries, frenzied trading at stock exchanges, medical breakthroughs, and corrupt corporate dealings are not generally experienced firsthand. Rather, popular perceptions of these aspects of life take shape largely in response to news and fictional stories in media. Like caricatures, media stories often create skewed impressions because the media cannot report most stories in detail or within a full context.⁹ For example, thanks to a heavy focus on crime news and police dramas, television exaggerates the likelihood of an individual becoming a victim of crime. Viewers therefore fear crime excessively, especially if they watch a lot of television.¹⁰

Attention to the mass media is pervasive among 21st-century Americans. Even in school, media are the basis for much learning about current events. An average adult in the United States spends nearly half of their leisure time consuming media. Averaged over an entire week, this amounts to more than seven hours of exposure per day to some form of mass media news or entertainment. The ability to attract such vast audiences of ordinary people, as well as political elites, is a major ingredient in the power of the mass media and makes them extraordinarily important for the individuals and groups whose stories and causes are publicized. Although their percentages have been shrinking, as Table 1-1 shows, some traditional media retain their dominance, even while the audiences for political news on digital and social media are growing. Recent years saw a gradual decline in local news consumption in particular. In 2018, local news programs' morning timeslots saw a 10% drop in viewership, and audiences for midday and prime-time news both declined by 19%. Advertising revenue from the newspaper industry dropped by 13% from 2017. Cable television news viewership for prime-time programming (on CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC) increased by about 8% in 2018, viewership for daytime programming increased by about 5%. Viewership for nightly network television news increased by 11% in 2018. During the 2020 election cycle, cable TV was the most relied-on platform for election night returns. Although nearly a quarter of Americans reported relying mainly on news websites or apps, 22% followed national network television news (ABC, CBS, or NBC), and only 9% turned mainly to social media.¹¹

Politically relevant information is often conveyed through stories that are not concerned explicitly with politics. In fact, because most people are exposed far more to nonpolitical information, fictional media (such as movies and entertainment television) are major suppliers of political images. For example, the 2020 season premiere of NBC's *Saturday Night Live* (SNL) had its highest ratings since 2016—the 46th season opener,

hosted by Chris Rock, attracted 8.24 million viewers from the coveted 18–49 age group, revealing a return to its usual election-year ratings bump.¹² Young viewers in particular regularly cite shows such as *SNL* or John Oliver’s *Last Week Tonight* as a primary source of news.¹³ During the 2016 cycle, *SNL* provided ample coverage of the presidential election campaign in its comedy skits with Kate McKinnon as Hillary Clinton and Alec Baldwin as Donald Trump.¹⁴ During the 2020 cycle, Baldwin continued as Trump, while Jim Carrey joined the cast to portray Joe Biden.

Entertainment shows portray social institutions, such as the police or the schools, in ways that either convey esteem or heap scorn upon them. These shows also express social judgments about various types of people. For instance, in its infancy, television sometimes depicted African Americans and women as politically naive and having limited abilities. This type of coverage conveys messages that audiences, including the misrepresented groups, may accept at face value, even when the portrayals distort real-world conditions. Audience members may also think that social conditions and judgments shown on television are widely accepted and therefore socially sanctioned.¹⁵

Not only are the media the chief source of most Americans’ views of the world, but they also provide the fastest way to disperse information throughout society. Major political news broadcasts by 24-hour services such as CNN or Fox News spread breaking stories throughout the country in minutes. People hear the stories directly from radio, television, or digital or social media or from other people.

All forms and types of mass media are politically important because of their potential to reach large audiences. However, the influence of each medium varies depending on its characteristics, the nature and quantity of the political messages it carries, and the size of the audience reached (see Box 1-1 for more on the various types of media and their audiences). Print media, including websites that feature text, generally supply the largest quantity of factual political information and analysis. They need readers who are literate at appropriate levels. Electronic media, especially audiovisual stories, provide a greater sense of reality, which explains why some audiences find audiovisual media more credible than print media. Moreover, large segments of the U.S. population have limited reading skills and find it far easier to capture meanings from pictures and spoken language. Audiovisual media also convey physical images, including body language and facial expressions, making them especially well-suited to attract viewers’ attention and arouse their emotions.¹⁶

Table 1-1 Election Night News Consumption Patterns, 2020 (Percentage)

Medium	2020
Cable TV news	30
News website or app	24
National network TV news	22
Social media feed	9
Presidential candidate/campaign	2
Something else	6

Source: Americans paid close attention as election returns came in. (2020, November 23). *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.journalism.org/2020/11/23/americans-paid-close-attention-as-election-returns-came-in/>.

Note: Table shows the percentage of U.S. adults who used the listed medium the most to follow the results of the presidential election after polls closed on Election Day. Respondents who did not give an answer or who tuned out the election results are not shown.

Box 1-1

Media Is a Plural Noun

It has become fashionable to talk about news media behavior and effects using the singular, as if the media were one giant, undifferentiated institution. Researchers strengthen that impression because they commonly generalize about media behavior and effects based on data drawn from a single news source—most often *The New York Times*. The resulting caricature hides the immense richness of the news media in topics and framing, in presentation forms and styles, and in the unique social and political environments that they reflect. Yes, indeed, *media* should be treated as a plural noun.

How does one medium differ from the next? Communications scholar Michael Schudson answers that question in the opening essay of a volume about the role of the news media in the contemporary United States. Schudson warns,

It is a mistake to identify American journalism exclusively with the dominant mainstream-television network news and high circulation metropolitan daily newspapers. This error is compounded . . . if attention is paid exclusively to leading hard-news reporting, and features, editorials, news analysis, opinion columns, and other elements of the journalistic mix are ignored.¹

Schudson identifies four distinct types of journalism, which are often combined to please various audiences. There is traditional mainstream journalism, often called “hard” news, and there is “soft” news tabloid journalism. Both differ from advocacy journalism, which is devoted to pleading particular causes, and from entertainment journalism, which may offer news but only as a by-product. The stories produced in these styles also bear the imprint of the various types of venues that present them: newspapers and magazines of all shapes and sizes, radio and television broadcast stations, and internet news sites and blogs. These diverse venues brim with a veritable smorgasbord of news stories, told from different perspectives and framed to carry unique shades of meanings effectively.

Their impact varies, depending on audience characteristics. U.S. scholars tend to think that “hard” print news is and should be king, but those claims are debatable. Compared to print news, audiovisual news captures much bigger audiences, and evidence is growing that it may also be the public’s most effective teacher. Some messages are primarily important because they reach huge audiences; others attract comparatively tiny audiences but are enormously influential nonetheless because some audience members have access to the country’s networks of power.

Finally, in the global world in which news now circulates, it is unduly parochial to think of U.S. media performing inside a national cocoon. *Media* is a plural noun in the truest sense because news media now have a global reach. Like the biblical tower of Babel, they carry a multiplicity of voices, each reflecting different environments and perspectives. Fortunately, unlike in biblical times, the discordant voices today, besides being heard, can be translated and considered. How they will be construed then becomes the paramount question.

1. Schudson, M. (2005). Orientations: The press and democracy in time and space. In G. Overholser & K. Hall Jamieson (Eds.), *The press* (pp. 1–3). Oxford University Press.

Functions of Mass Media

What major societal functions do the mass media perform? Political scientist Harold Lasswell, a pioneer in media studies, mentions three things: surveillance of the world to report ongoing events, interpretation of the meaning of events, and socialization of individuals into their cultural settings.¹⁷ To these three, a fourth function must be added: manipulation of politics. The manner in which these four functions are performed affects the political fate of individuals, groups, and social organizations as well as the course of domestic and international politics.

Surveillance

Surveillance involves two major tasks. When it serves the collective needs of the public, it constitutes *public surveillance*, and when it serves the needs of individual citizens, we call it *private surveillance*. Although private surveillance may lead to political activities, its primary functions are gratifying personal needs and quieting personal anxieties.

Public Surveillance

Newspeople determine what is news—that is, which political happenings will be reported and which will be ignored. Their choices are politically significant because they affect who and what will have a good chance to become the focus for political discussion and action.¹⁸ News stories may force politicians to respond to situations on which their views would not have been aired otherwise. Without media attention, the people and events covered by the news might have less influence on decision makers—or none at all. Conditions that might be tolerated in obscurity can become intolerable in the glare of publicity. Take the example of the disastrous statement made by 2020 presidential election candidate Joe Biden during an interview on the radio program *The Breakfast Club*. In an attempt to emphasize the strength of his connection with the Black community, Biden said, “I tell you, if you have a problem figuring out whether you’re for me or for Trump, then you ain’t Black.” Though it was just one of several Biden gaffes from the 2020 election, it was particularly embarrassing. The ill-considered, awkward comment earned Biden and the campaign an enormous amount of not-very-flattering social (and mainstream) media attention.¹⁹ Many also undoubtedly recall a now infamous example from the 2016 cycle: Donald Trump’s sexually explicit off-camera comments about kissing and groping women on an *Access Hollywood* bus.²⁰ The public

airings of such remarks can lead to the political downfall of major political candidates and officeholders. Politicians are keenly aware of the media's agenda-setting power. That is why they try mightily to time and structure events to yield as much favorable publicity as possible and to forestall damaging coverage.

The consequences of media surveillance can be good as well as bad. Misperceptions and scares created by media stories have undermined confidence in good policies and practices, good people, and good products on many occasions. The human and economic costs are often vast. For example, if media stories overemphasize crime and corruption in the city, scared residents may move to the suburbs, leaving the city deserted and even less safe and deprived of tax revenues. Speculation that international conflicts or economic downturns are in the offing may scare investors and produce fluctuations in domestic and international stock markets and commodity exchanges. Serious economic (and hence political) consequences may ensue.

Fear of publicity can be as powerful a force in shaping action as actual exposure. Politicians and business leaders know what damage an unfavorable story can do and act accordingly, either to avoid or conceal objectionable behaviors or to atone for them by public confessions. President Bill Clinton, whose eight-year term was pockmarked with scandals, tried valiantly to hide some of them by forceful denials of allegations. But whenever proof made the charges undeniable, he escaped much public wrath by publicly apologizing for his misbehavior.²¹ In the past, presidents with the skill or good fortune to ensure that negative news stories did not “stick to them” in career-ending ways were referred to as “Teflon” presidents. (Teflon is a type of nonstick cooking pan.) Donald Trump earned the Teflon label during his presidential candidacy and his term in office. His 2016 candidacy survived the aforementioned *Access Hollywood* scandal as well as other scandals related to inappropriate sexual behavior, many of which were brought on by lawsuits and public allegations of sexual assault and harassment from several women. His term in office was similarly characterized by a steady stream of scandals. Even in the last months and weeks of his presidency, Trump was reported to have referred to American veterans who lost their lives in war as “losers,” and this account was confirmed by multiple news outlets. Mere weeks later, he was caught on tape—by one of America's most famous investigative reporters—admitting that he lied to the American public about risks and threats associated with COVID-19. Despite all this (and numerous other scandals unnamed here), President Trump's approval numbers barely shifted throughout his time in office,

certainly little enough to earn Teflon status. However, unfortunately for Trump, his Teflon coating also prevented benefits from coverage of his administration's accomplishments from sticking. There was very little movement among his approval ratings in either direction over the course of his term, indicating that the numbers for those who disapproved did not move much either.²²

The media can doom people and events to obscurity by inattention as well. When the media have more information than they can transmit, many important stories remain untold. That happens most dramatically when the news becomes focused on a single upheaval, such as a major natural or human-made disaster, an election outcome, or a scandal. The time and space used for the single event usurp the time and space of happenings that otherwise would be reported. The size of “news holes”—the time and space available for reporting the news—is fairly inelastic. Newspeople also ignore important events that do not seem “newsworthy” by accepted journalistic criteria or that fail to catch their attention. Conscious attempts to suppress information for ideological or political reasons are another, but far less frequent, reason for lack of coverage.

For many years, left-wing social critics often faulted mainstream U.S. journalists for using their news selection power to strengthen white middle-class values and disparage liberal viewpoints. These critics claim that the media deliberately perpetuate capitalist exploitation of the masses, in line with the ideological preferences of media owners. Critics also claim that the media have intentionally suppressed the facts about dangerous products, such as alcohol and tobacco, and about the socially harmful activities of large corporations, which may be responsible for water and air pollution or unsafe consumer goods.²³ By the same token, right-wing critics complain that the media give undue attention to enemies of the established social and political order in hopes of undermining it. Each camp cites a long list of stories to support its contentions.²⁴ Of course, largely in response to both rising polarization and the re-emergence and popularity of partisan news, claims of bias from both the left and right have only increased in recent years.

Journalists reject these charges. Most journalists deny political motives in news selection and defend their choices on the basis of the general criteria of newsworthiness (see Chapters 3 and 14 for more extensive treatments of this subject). They, too, can muster evidence from news stories to support their claims. Yet, as the media environment grows in complexity with so many content choices available on an array of platforms and devices, it is increasingly difficult for citizen-audiences to differentiate between

mainstream news (which ostensibly attempts to produce objective reporting), partisan news, political opinion or commentary, and so-called fake news. This difficulty is reflected in news consumers' growing dissatisfaction with, and distrust of, journalists and news organizations.

Besides calling attention to matters of potential public concern, the media also provide cues about the importance of an issue. Important stories are covered prominently on websites and front pages with big headlines and pictures or as major television or radio features. Less important matters are more likely to be buried in the back pages, be listed at the bottom of a web page, or have brief exposure on television or radio. However, nearly all coverage, even when it is brief and comparatively inconspicuous, lends an aura of significance to publicized topics. Through the sheer fact of coverage, the media can confer status on individuals and organizations. The media "function essentially as agencies of social legitimation—as forces, that is, which reaffirm those ultimate value standards and beliefs, which in turn uphold the social and political status quo."²⁵

Television helped to make African American civil rights leaders and their causes household names. Martin Luther King Jr. and Jesse Jackson became national figures in part because television showed them giving speeches and leading marches and protests. In King's case, television captured the riots following his assassination. An individual who gains a hearing on radio or television often becomes an instant celebrity, whether they are an emerging political candidate on the national scene, such as 2020 presidential primary contender "Mayor Pete" Buttigieg, later nominated as President Joe Biden's pick for transportation secretary; a teenage climate activist and crusader such as Greta Thunberg, whose goals and activism are so newsworthy that she is now the subject of the highly acclaimed documentary film *I Am Greta*; or a young poet such as Amanda Gorman, who was widely acknowledged as having stolen the show at Joe Biden's presidential inauguration (see Photo 1-1). Their unpublicized counterparts remain obscure. Because publicity is crucial for political success, actors on the political scene often deliberately create situations likely to receive media coverage. Daniel Boorstin labeled events arranged primarily to stimulate media coverage as "pseudo-events."²⁶ Such events range from news conferences called by public figures (even when there is no news to announce) to physical assaults on people and property by members of protest groups who want to dramatize grievances. Newspeople who must cover such events may feel manipulated and resentful, but they are loath to allow competing media to scoop these events.



Photo 1-1 WASHINGTON, DC; JANUARY 20: American poet Amanda Gorman recites one of her poems during the 59th inaugural ceremony on the West Front of the U.S. Capitol on January 20, 2021, in Washington, DC. During the inauguration ceremony, Joe Biden became the 46th president of the United States.

Source: Photo by Patrick Semansky-Pool/Getty Images

When events are exceptionally significant or widely known already, or when the story is reported by competing media, the journalism community loses control over the news flow. For example, journalistic standards demand the reporting of news about prominent political leaders and major domestic and international events.²⁷ Aside from such unavoidable situations, coverage is discretionary for a wide range of people and happenings.

The power of the media to set the agenda for politics is not subject to a system of formal checks and balances as is the power of the U.S. government. Media power does not undergo periodic review through the electoral process. If media emphases or claims are incorrect, remedies are few. Truth-in-advertising laws protect citizens from false advertising of consumer goods but not from false political claims or improper news selection or biases by media personnel. The courts have interpreted restrictions on the news media's power to choose freely what to report and how to frame it as impeding the constitutional right to free speech and a free press. Media critic Jay Blumler expresses the dilemma well:

Media power is not supposed to be shared: That's an infringement of editorial autonomy. It is not supposed to be controlled: That's censorship. It's not even supposed to be

influenced: That's news management! But why should media personnel be exempt from Lord Acton's dictum that all power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely? And if they are not exempt, who exactly is best fitted to guard the press guardians, as it were?²⁸

Private Surveillance

Average citizens may not think much about the broader political impact of the news they read, hear, and watch. They use the media primarily to keep in touch with what they deem personally important. The media are their eyes and ears to the world, their means of surveillance. The media, as Marshall McLuhan (another pioneering media scholar) observed, are "sense extensions" for individuals who cannot directly witness most of the events of interest to them and their communities.²⁹ The media tell their audiences about weather, sports, jobs, fashions, economic conditions, social and cultural events, health and science, and the public and private lives of famous people.

The ability to stay informed makes people feel secure, whether or not they remember what they read or hear or see. Even though the news may be bad, people feel that at least there will be no startling surprises. News reassures us that the political system continues to operate despite constant crises and frequent mistakes. Reassurance is important for peace of mind, but it also tends to encourage political quiescence because there is no need to act if political leaders seem to be doing their jobs. For good or ill, the public's quiescence helps maintain the political and economic status quo.³⁰

Other significant private functions that the mass media fulfill for many people are entertainment, companionship, tension relief, and a way to pass the time with minimal physical or mental exertion. The mass media can satisfy these important personal needs conveniently and cheaply. People who otherwise might be frustrated and dissatisfied can participate vicariously in current political happenings, in sports and musical events, in the lives of famous people, and in the lives of families and communities featured in the news.³¹

Interpretation

Media not only survey the events of the day and bring them to public and private attention, but they also interpret the events' meanings, put them into context, and speculate about their consequences. Most incidents lend themselves to a variety of interpretations, depending on the values

and experiences of the interpreter. The kind of interpretation affects the political consequences of media reports. For example, research shows that low-income communities and communities of color are disproportionately harmed by climate change and environmental problems. Policies aimed at improving the environment do not help these communities as much.³² In response, a growing number of political elites are framing discussions about climate change and environmental policy as inseparable from issues of social justice. The same is true of the economy and national security, both of which face threats from climate change. In late January of 2021, during the first weeks of his presidency, Joe Biden signed a new executive order creating a White House Council on Environmental Justice. He described the executive order as part of a broad effort to “place environmental justice at the center of all we do, addressing the disproportionate health and environmental and economic impacts on communities of color, so-called fenceline communities, especially those communities—Brown, Black, Native American, poor whites.”

Political leaders know that in addition to potentially broadening the constituency of people concerned about climate change, introducing these new policy considerations into climate change debates may allow journalists to use a new vocabulary, which may help them steer clear of the negative connotations some party members associate with this policy domain. For example, on January 27, 2021, Biden signed an executive order to discontinue the practice of oil and gas leasing on federal lands and waters.³³ Tellingly, in the effort to court bipartisan support for these actions in the wake of criticisms on the grounds that ending this practice will hurt jobs, he opened his public remarks on the order with this statement: “Today is Climate Day at the White House, which means it’s Jobs Day at the White House.” Referring to the health and national security impact of climate change, he called it a “maximum threat.” National climate advisor Gina McCarthy also reiterated the administration’s strategy: “to address climate change as one of four major interrelated crises that include COVID-19, the economic downturn, and racial inequality.”³⁴

As the difficulty in untangling environmental policy efforts from these domains becomes more apparent in the political debates among elites, social justice, the economy, and national security it will be increasingly reflected in the words and phrases journalists use in their reporting on climate change. This may change journalists’ interpretation of the issue in ways that shape opinion or the contours of the constituency interested in the implications of climate change, possibly making it wider. Such thinking was undoubtedly part of the Biden administration’s strategy for their framing of the issue in those early days of the Biden presidency.

Regardless of which frame they end up favoring, news media reporting will likely continue to influence the type of interpretation that climate change and environmental policy stories receive. In the end, interpretations will largely hinge on journalists' decisions, made independently or in response to pressures, to frame the story in a specific way and to choose informants accordingly. Journalists' inclinations help determine how the news is framed, which in turn affects its likely impact.

By suggesting the causes and relationships of events, the media may shape opinions without explicitly telling audiences which views seem right or wrong. This is one reason many people were critical about coverage of police responses to Black Lives Matter protests relative to coverage of the police response to the violent mob that attacked the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. Press portrayals of such events can determine whether American audiences view violent protests and a lack of adequate police response (or violent police responses to peaceful protests) with considerable alarm.³⁵

News presentations can shape people's conclusions in countless ways.

We [journalists] can attribute any social problem to official policies, the machinations of those who benefit from it, or the pathology of those who suffer from it. We can trace it back to class or racial inequalities, to ideologies such as nationalism or patriotism, or to resistance to the regime. We can root the problem in God, in its historic genesis, in the accidental or systematic conjuncture of events, in rationality, in irrationality, or in a combination of these or other origins. In choosing any such ultimate cause we are also depicting a setting, an appropriate course of action, and sets of virtuous and evil characters, and doing so in a way that will appeal to some part of the public that sees its own sentiments or interests reflected in that choice of a social scene.³⁶

The items that media personnel select to illustrate a point or to characterize a political actor need not be intrinsically important to be influential in shaping opinions and evaluations. They do not even need exposure in respected media outlets; the mere threat of widespread publicity through traditional or social media is often enough. That is why in the weeks and months of protests and social justice activism following George Floyd's killing by police, teenagers around the country started strategically leveraging social media to call out their peers for racist behavior, hoping to attract publicity to force apologies, curb behavior, or lead to other repercussions

such as the revoking of college admissions, job offers, scholarships, or other important privileges.³⁷

Socialization

The third function of major mass media that Lasswell mentions is political socialization (Chapter 10). It involves learning basic values and orientations that prepare individuals to fit into their cultural milieu. Before the 1970s, studies largely ignored the mass media because parents and the schools were deemed the primary agents of socialization. Research in the 1970s finally established that the media play a crucial role in political socialization.³⁸ Most information that young people acquire about their political world comes directly or indirectly from the mass media either through news offerings or entertainment shows or through social media sites such as Facebook or Twitter. The media present specific facts as well as general values, teaching young people which elements produce desirable outcomes. Media also provide people with behavior models. Because young people generally have attitudes and behaviors that are less firmly established, they are receptive to using such information to develop their opinions.

Many of the new orientations and opinions that adults acquire during their lifetime also are based on information from the mass media. People do not necessarily adopt the precise attitudes and opinions that earn the media's praise; rather, mass media information provides the ingredients that people use to adjust their existing attitudes and opinions to keep pace with a changing world. The mass media deserve credit, therefore, for a sizable share of adult political socialization and resocialization. Examples of resocialization—the restructuring of established basic attitudes—include the shifts in sexual morality and racial attitudes that the American public has undergone since the middle of the last century and the changing views about relations with mainland China and with Russia.³⁹

Manipulation

The work journalists do has political implications. Intentionally or not, journalists sometimes become major players in the game of politics; they do not always play their traditional role as chroniclers of information provided by others. The most common way for a journalist to break out of the role of political bystander is through an investigation. Many major media enterprises contain investigative units because investigative stories are both

important and popular. They are also expensive to produce and tend to become scarce when media organizations are forced to economize.

In democratic societies, the purpose of many journalistic investigations is to *muckrake*, serving as an adversarial watchdog. Journalists who investigate corruption and wrongdoing to stimulate the government to clean up the “dirt” they have exposed are called *muckrakers*. The term comes from a rake designed to collect manure. President Theodore Roosevelt was the first to apply the term to journalism. Muckraking may have several goals.⁴⁰ The primary purpose may be to expose misconduct in government and produce reforms, or the chief purpose may be to present sensational information that attracts large media audiences and enhances profits. Other investigative stories (or story interpretations) may be designed to affect politics in line with a media outlet’s political brand (Chapter 12).

Who Should Control News Making?

Attempts by governments to control and manipulate the media are universal because public officials everywhere believe that media are important political forces. This belief is based on the assumption that institutions that control the public’s information supply can shape public knowledge and behavior and thereby determine support for government or opposition to it. Although media control occurs in all societies, its extent, nature, and purposes vary for several reasons. Political ideology is an important one. In countries in which free expression of opinion is highly valued and in which dissent is respected, the media tend to be comparatively unrestrained. The right of the press to criticize governments also flourishes when the prevailing ideology grants that governments are fallible and often corrupt and that average citizens are capable of forming valuable opinions about the conduct of government. Finally, freedom of the press, even when it becomes a thorn in the side of the government, is more easily tolerated when governments are well established and politically and economically secure. In nations where governments are unstable and resources are insufficient to meet the country’s needs, it may be difficult to put up with press behavior that is apt to topple the government or slow its plans for economic development.

Nowhere are the media totally free from formal and informal government and social controls, even in times of peace. On the whole, authoritarian governments control more extensively and more rigidly than nonauthoritarian ones, but all control systems represent points on a continuum. There are also gradations of control within nations, depending on

the current regime and political setting, regional and local variations, and the nature of news. The specifics of control systems vary from country to country, but the overall patterns are similar.⁴¹

Authoritarian Control Systems

Authoritarian control systems may be based on a totalitarian ideology and designed to control and use the media to support ideological goals, or they may be nonideological and simply represent the desire of the ruling elites to control media output tightly so that it does not interfere with their conduct of government. Examples of nonideological authoritarian control exist in states ruled by military governments or where constitutional guarantees have been suspended. Cuba and China are examples of control based on communist ideology.

In today's world, fully or partially authoritarian systems of media control prevail in the majority of countries, although many governments profess to want a less-controlled system and are struggling to move in that direction. Nonetheless, governmental attempts to control internal and external news flows are omnipresent because governments fear that unrestrained media will create serious political instability, whether through accurate messages or through unintentionally or deliberately false ones. The arrival of the digital era has presented challenges for government efforts to control the spread of information. Digital and social media, especially when coupled with mobile access to the internet, are viewed by authoritarian governments as tools for collective action, on-the-ground mobilization, and regime instability. Some have developed aggressive strategies for coping with these challenges. China, for example, is credited with developing the most sophisticated system for controlling internet content in the world as well as the most broadly reaching effort to suppress social media. Authoritarian systems operate on the assumption that government must control the media because news stories are essential for engendering support for the government's mission (see Table 1-2). The media may point out minor deficiencies or corruption of low-level officials and suggest adjustments in line with prevailing policies, but criticism of the basic system or its rulers is considered destructive. Chinese internet censorship is an example: Criticism of the state, leaders, and policies is published while posts that facilitate collective action are censored.⁴²

Beyond that, the media are free to choose the stories they wish to publish, so long as government officials agree that the stories do not interfere with public policies. In totalitarian societies, the likely political and social

effects of a story—rather than its general significance, novelty, or audience appeal—determine what will be published and what will be buried in silence. For instance, news about accidents, disasters, and crimes is often suppressed because of fears that it may weaken the image of an all-powerful political system. Even entertainment programs, such as music and drama performances and cartoon shorts in movie theaters, must carry appropriate social messages or have historical significance. The government supports such entertainment financially because it serves the important public purpose of shaping people's minds in support of the political system.

Democratic Systems

In democracies, the public sees journalists as its eyes and ears. Journalists are expected to scrutinize government performance and report their findings. If media surveillance causes governments to fall and public officials to be ousted, democracy is well served.

Although this is the theory behind the role of media in democratic societies, the practice is less clear-cut. In the United States, for example, neither newspeople nor government officials are completely at ease with the media's watchdog role. This is especially true in the contemporary era, where press criticism abounds, trust in media is extremely low, and charges of media bias are rampant. The media limit their criticism to what they perceive as perversions of the public's basic social and political values or noteworthy examples of corruption and waste. They rarely question the widely accepted fundamentals of the political system, such as its orientation toward majority rule or private capitalism or individualism.

Because American journalists tend to choose established elites as their primary sources of news, their links to the existing power structures are strong.⁴³ They may even share information with government agencies, including law enforcement bodies such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). When disclosure might cause harm, reporters in a democratic society occasionally withhold important news at the request of the government. This has happened repeatedly when the lives of hostages were at stake or when military interventions were imminent. In an effort to keep their images untarnished by media attacks, government officials may try to control the media through regulatory legislation or through rewards and punishments.

The chief responsibility of the news media in democratic societies is to provide the general public with information and entertainment. According to the U.S. version of the libertarian philosophy, anything that happens that

seems interesting or important for media audiences may become news. It should be reported quickly, accurately, and without any attempt to convey a particular point of view. Topics with the widest audience appeal should be pervasive, which explains the ample doses of sex and violence. Audience appeal is then expected to translate into good profits for media owners either through fees paid by audience members or through advertising revenues. Although audiences may learn important things from the media, libertarians believe that teaching is not the media's chief task. Nor is it their responsibility to question the truth, accuracy, or merits of the information supplied to them by their sources. Rather, it is left to the news audience to decide what to believe and what to doubt.

By contrast, adherents to the tenets of social responsibility believe that news and entertainment presented by the mass media should reflect societal concerns. Media personnel should be participants in the political process, not merely reporters of the passing scene. As guardians of the public welfare, they should foster political action when necessary by publicizing social evils such as rampant industrial pollution of air and water. In a similar vein, undesirable viewpoints and questionable accusations should be denied exposure, however sensational they may be. If reporters believe that the government is hiding information that the public needs to know, they should try to discover the facts and publicize them.

Social responsibility journalism and totalitarian journalism share some important features. Both approaches advocate using the media to support the basic ideals of their societies and to shape people into better beings. Proponents of both kinds of journalism are convinced that their goals are good and would not be achieved in a media system dominated by the whims of media owners, advertisers, or audiences. But the similarities should not be exaggerated. Social advocacy in democratic systems lacks the fervor, clout, and single-mindedness it has in its totalitarian counterpart. Social responsibility journalism rarely speaks with a single uncontested voice throughout society. Nevertheless, it frightens and antagonizes many news professionals and news audiences. If one agrees that the media should be used to influence social thought and behavior for "good" purposes, who should decide which purposes deserve to be included in that category? Critics of social responsibility journalism point out that journalists do not have a public mandate to act as arbiters of social values and policies in a society that has many disparate visions of truth and goodness. Newspeople lack the legitimacy that comes only from being elected by the public or appointed by duly elected officials.

Irrespective of the merits or faults of these arguments, today, social responsibility journalism is popular with a sizable portion of the news

Table 1-2 Media Roles Under Different Regime Types

Authoritarian Regime Assumptions	Democratic Regime Assumptions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Governments know and serve people's best interests. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Governments often fail to serve people's best interests.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Media should stress the government's virtues. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Media should confront the government when officials and policies seem flawed.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • News should engender support for major policies. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • News should stimulate critical thinking about major policies.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • News and entertainment programs should be selected for their social values. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • News and entertainment programs should be selected for audience appeal.

Source: Composed by Doris A. Graber.

profession.⁴⁴ Pulitzer Prizes and other honors go to journalists who have successfully exposed questionable practices in the interest of social improvement. The most prominent “villains” targeted for exposure are usually big government and big business.⁴⁵

Models of News Making

Beyond the basic concerns reflected in the philosophies of libertarians and social responsibility advocates, there are many other guiding principles for reporting events. For example, news making can be described in terms of five distinct models: the mirror model, the professional model, the organizational model, the political model, and the civic journalism model. Each represents judgments about the major forces behind news making that shape the nature of news and its political impact.

Underlying Theories

Proponents of the mirror model contend that news is and should be a reflection of reality. “We don’t make the news, we just report it” is their slogan. The implication is that newspeople impartially report all significant happenings that come to their attention. Critics of the mirror model point out that this conception of news making is unrealistic. Countless significant events take place daily, forcing journalists to determine their relative newsworthiness

and decide which to report. Events that are publicized inevitably loom disproportionately large compared with unpublicized events. The way the story is framed in words and pictures further distorts reality.

In the professional model, news making is viewed as an endeavor of highly skilled professionals who put together a balanced and interesting collage of events selected for importance and attractiveness to specific media audiences. There is no pretense that the end product mirrors the world. For economic reasons, anticipated audience reaction is especially influential in determining which stories pass scrutiny and which are ignored. This is also sometimes referred to as the *economic model* of news.

The organizational model, sometimes called the *bargaining model*, is based on organizational theory. Its proponents contend that the pressures inherent in organizational processes and goals determine which items will be published. Pressures spring from interpersonal relations among journalists and between them and their information sources, from professional norms within the news organization and from constraints arising from technical news production processes, cost–benefit considerations, and legal regulations.

The political model rests on the assumption that news everywhere reflects the ideological biases of individual newspeople as well as the pressures of the political environment in which the news organization operates. The media cover high-status people and approved institutions; people and events outside the dominant system or remote from the centers of power are generally ignored. Supporters of the prevailing system are pictured as good guys and opponents as bad guys.

In the 1990s, public journalism or *civic journalism* became popular, spurred by widespread concern that average citizens shun participation in public affairs and distrust government and the news media. Proponents of the civic journalism model believe that the press can discover citizens' concerns and then write stories that help audiences play an active and successful role in public life.⁴⁶ Journalists must articulate and explain public policy choices in understandable language. They must facilitate a public dialogue that encourages and respects diverse views. After consensus has been reached among the clients of a particular news venue, the venue and its clients must vigorously champion appropriate public policies.

None of these models fully explains news making; rather, the process reflects all of them in varying degrees. Because the influences that shape news making fluctuate, one needs to examine individual news making situations carefully to account for the factors at work. Organizational pressures, for instance, depend on the interactions of people within the organization, and these can also be linked to professional or economic considerations.

Audience tastes change or are interpreted differently. Perceptions of “facts” differ, depending on reporters’ dispositions. Moreover, the precise mix of factors that explains news making in any particular instance depends largely on chance and on the needs of a particular news medium.

Control Methods

Societies use legal, normative, structural, and economic means to control news media within their countries. All countries have laws to prevent common press misbehavior. For instance, laws may forbid publication of deliberate falsehoods. All societies also have social norms that the press generally heeds because it craves public approval or fears government or private sector retaliation. Hence, media are unlikely to ridicule sacred concepts or widely accepted values. The way media organizations are structured, operated, and financed also shapes their product. The Russian government closely regulates, controls, and finances media enterprises. In December 2020, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a set of controversial new laws to expand his government’s ability to label organizations as foreign agents and introduce several harsh new restrictions on media organizations.⁴⁷ Russian media are constrained under these kinds of conditions, and they will usually not dare to criticize the government’s decision making and tactics. Journalists’ behavior largely reflects the nature of their environments.⁴⁸ They are often docile and obey rules strictly in countries where media control is heavy-handed, and they become far more daring and unconventional in liberal, individualistically oriented countries such as the United States and England.

The combination of methods by which governments control the media varies, and so do the major objectives of control. Governments can control media content by limiting entry into the media business. For example, the government may require licenses for entry and grant them only to people it deems desirable, as is common in authoritarian societies. By contrast, democratic regimes rarely make formal attempts to deny foes of the regime access to the media. However, because the capacity of the broadcast spectrum is limited, control through franchise is quite common for television and radio media. Franchises often bestow monopoly control. In most democracies, newspapers rarely need licenses, and access to the internet has remained equally unrestricted. In the United States, for instance, anyone with sufficient money can start a newspaper or newsletter or create a website or blog.

Media also may be controlled through the manipulation of access to news. Information may be put beyond the reach of media by declaring it to be confidential and by barring reporters from government archives. In

addition to such formal control of potentially damaging news, informal restraints curb the actual flow of news. All government units, and often many of their subdivisions, have information control systems by which they determine which news to conceal or release and how to frame it (Chapter 5). In 1993, President Clinton, who was annoyed with reporting about his presidency, took the unusual step of limiting reporters' easy access to the White House communication office by closing off a connecting hallway to the press room.⁴⁹

In the time since Clinton's administration, White House efforts to control information are increasingly aggressive. The Obama administration was notorious for its press dealings, and the immediate future looks no better.⁵⁰ From the earliest days of Hillary Clinton's 2016 campaign for the presidency, the press complained about access and her refusal to hold press conferences.⁵¹ In fact, both 2016 contenders exhibited troubling signs for press–White House relations during the campaign. Trump held regular press conferences and granted many interviews, but by October 2016, the White House Correspondents' Association was publicly complaining that both candidates were violating public trust by restricting access and failing to abide by the norm of keeping a regular “protective press pool.”⁵² As president-elect, Trump was soundly criticized by the press for a lack of access and the failure to provide the American public with transparency about the administration's plans and transition into power.⁵³ Press struggles for access to the White House persisted throughout President Trump's term in office. In 2019, the Trump administration rolled out a new set of criteria that journalists must meet in order to qualify for a “hard pass,” which granted the highest level of press access. The criteria set an extremely high bar for earning this level of access, mandating that journalists be present in the White House for at least 90 days out of a 180-day period. When dozens of prominent journalists, including all six of *The Washington Post's* White House correspondents, were determined to have failed to meet those criteria in May, their press passes were promptly revoked.⁵⁴

On January 20, 2021, President Joe Biden's press secretary, Jen Psaki, held her first press briefing with the White House press corps (Photo 1-2). In it, Psaki pledged to bring transparency back to the briefing room and to rebuild trust with the American people. She also announced the Biden communication team's plan to restore daily press briefings as part of that effort. The tradition of White House daily press briefings all but disappeared during the Trump administration.⁵⁵

Authoritarian governments often use censorship laws or regulations to control the flow of news. In some countries, nothing may be printed or broadcast until the government censor has approved it. At times,



Photo 1-2 White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki Holds News Briefing on President Biden's Inauguration Day.

Source: Photo by Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

governments will direct papers or magazines to make deletions after their product has been prepared for printing or is already printed. This leaves tantalizing white spaces or missing pages. Government officials often write or edit television and radio scripts, and media outlets must broadcast these without editorial changes. In the past, totalitarian countries could frequently block all unapproved communications from abroad by jamming foreign broadcasts and prohibiting the import of foreign printed materials. In the internet age, such controls have become well-nigh impossible. Democratic governments also often use legal and normative pressures to avert potentially damaging political news or news that violates widely cherished social norms. They commonly claim that concerns about press freedoms have motivated the restrictions on news. Publication controls increase markedly in periods of crisis and war.

All governments use treason and sedition laws to control media output. “Treason” and “sedition” can be defined broadly or narrowly. Anything that is critical of the government can be called treasonable or seditious, especially in times of war. In democratic societies, media and the government are in

perennial disagreement about the tipping point. Governments lean toward protection; the media lean toward disclosure. People judged guilty of treason or sedition may be sentenced to prison or even executed. Given the social pressures to act patriotically and the severity of the penalty, treason is rare. Most journalists avoid difficulties with official censors and with treason and sedition laws by refraining from using material that is likely to be objectionable. Formal government censorship then becomes replaced largely by social pressures and self-censorship—which are the most potent forms of constraint on human behaviors.

The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which provides that “Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press,” has given the media an exceptionally strong basis for resisting government controls in the United States. The courts have ruled, however, that the protection is not absolute. On occasion, it must give way to social rights that the courts consider to be superior. For example, media are forbidden from publicizing the names of CIA secret agents because that would endanger them and destroy their usefulness.

A limited number of controls, such as regulatory laws, court decisions, and informal social pressures, guard against excesses by the media. In the United States, the courts have been loath to impose restraints prior to publication, such as granting injunctions that would stop publication of information, on the grounds that it would cause irreparable harm. But informal social and political pressures and the fear of indictments after publication have restrained presentation of potentially disturbing stories. Besides guarding state survival through treason and sedition laws, government controls commonly shield sensitive governmental proceedings, protect individual reputations and privacy, and safeguard the prevailing moral standards of the community. Curbs on publication of government secrets—so-called classified information—often engender controversy because governments tend to be overzealous in controlling material that they deem potentially harmful to themselves. Finally, most governments also have laws protecting the reputations of individuals or groups and laws against obscenity.

Defining the limits of government control over information dissemination raises difficult questions for democratic societies. Does official censorship, however minimal, open the way for excessive curbs on free expression? What guidelines are available to determine how far censorship should go? What types of material, if any, can harm children? Or adults? Should ethnic and racial slurs be prohibited on the ground that they damage minorities’ self-image? The answers are controversial and problematic.

The limitations on the freedom of publication in democratic societies raise questions about the actual differences in press freedom in democratic and authoritarian societies. Is there really a difference, for example, in the independence of government-operated television networks in France and in North Korea? The answer is a resounding yes. The degree of restraint varies so sharply that the systems are fundamentally different. In authoritarian societies, the main objective of controls is to support the regime in power. In democratic societies, the media are usually free to oppose the regime, to weaken it, and even to topple it. Although the media rarely carry their power to the latter extreme, the potential is there. It is this potential that makes the media in democratic societies a genuine restraint on governmental abuses of power and a potent shaper of government action.

SUMMARY

The mass media are an important influence on politics because they regularly and rapidly present politically crucial information to huge audiences. These audiences include political elites and decision makers as well as large numbers of average citizens whose political activities, however sporadic, are shaped by information from the mass media.

Decisions made by media personnel about what and whom to cover determine what information becomes available to media audiences and what remains unavailable. By putting stories into perspective and interpreting them, reporters assign meaning to the information and indicate the standards by which it ought to be judged. At times, reporters even generate political action directly through their own investigations or indirectly through their capacity to stimulate pseudo-events.

Although social scientists still find it difficult to pinpoint the scope of media impact on particular political events, politicians and their governments everywhere are keenly aware of the political importance of the media. Therefore, these governments have policies to shape the media's political role in their societies. Those policies have been buttressed by constitutional and legal rules as well as by a host of informal arrangements. In this chapter, we have briefly described how the basic policies, constitutional arrangements, and legal provisions differ in authoritarian and democratic regimes.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is the mass media in the U.S. important for politics and for democratic society? What is it about democratic governance in particular that makes the media so important?
2. What are the major functions mass media serve in the U.S.? Why are these the key functions? Do you think all of these functions are being served as well as possible by the U.S. media today? If not, why not? Are some outlets doing better than others?
3. Why does it matter who owns and controls the media? How does ownership and control (at least potentially) change the nature of the coverage we might see? Why does it matter within the context of a democratic system in particular?
4. What are the various models of news making? Which model do you think is the one behind most of the news you encounter? Which of the models do you think is most common? Which model or combination of models do you think would be best for serving society's needs today?

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