

# 14

## The News Media



ampaign fund-raising? There's an app for that. Counting electoral votes? There's an app for that. Aggregating, sharing, and organizing political news? There's an app for that, too.

The Internet, smartphones, and social media have transformed many aspects of Americans' lives, and politics is no exception. Gone are the days of the weekly, and even daily, news cycle. In the modern world, political news is happening—and being reported—almost instantaneously. No longer do newspaper publishers have to typeset every individual letter, as they did in the earliest days of the republic. No longer do journalists file daily reports to be aired on the nightly news, well after a campaign event has occurred. Instead, reporters can post live Twitter updates, complete with photos, tips, and even video, as a campaign event is occurring.

Even the way citizens consume their news has changed. The newspaper, once the lifeblood of American democracy, was supplanted by TV news in the 1960s. Today, TV is still the most popular news source for all Americans, but the Internet is gaining rapidly, even outpacing TV among the youngest Americans. Large percentages of Americans, moreover, report getting political news not only on their computers but also on smartphones and tablets. In an average day, one-quarter of Americans will access news on two or more digital devices.<sup>1</sup>

These changes in the production and consumption of news have affected the way that newsmakers organize their public relations strategies and staffs. Nearly all congressional candidates in 2014 maintained Web sites; most include audio and video Web links. Political leaders maintain Facebook and Twitter sites to stay in touch with their constituents and monitor public opinion. And, with the advent of narrowcasting and infotainment, political leaders can choose to appear in a greater variety of venues than ever before.

While these changes result in many positives for American democracy, and may serve to engage traditionally underserved populations, they also can have negative consequences. As we will discuss throughout this chapter allowing citizens to become too close to their leaders may

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**THE MEDIA ACT AS AN INTERMEDIARY BETWEEN CITIZENS AND GOVERNMENT** Above, newspaper reporters take pen and paper notes while interviewing President Gerald Ford in the Oval Office during the 1970s. Below, covering the campaign of President Barack Obama in 2012 was a multimedia experience; smartphones and tablet computers were essential tools for any member of the press corps.



**mass media**

The entire array of organizations through which information is collected and disseminated to the general public.

**news media**

Media providing the public with new information about subjects of public interest.

remove some of the filter that the Framers deliberately imposed on the political system. Giving average citizens a glimpse inside the process may strip away too much of the veneer from policy making, leading to disillusionment with government and leaders. And, moving from professional journalists publishing on clear deadlines to a world of citizen journalists and nearly constant updates may weaken the media's traditional watchdog role and adherence to journalistic standards.

•••

The Framers agreed that a free press was necessary to monitor government and ensure the continuation of a democratic society, a tenet they codified in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Throughout history, the press has fulfilled this watchdog role, acting as an intermediary between citizens and their government. The news media inform the public, giving citizens the information they need to choose their leaders and influence the direction of public policy. As this chapter will discuss, the way the media interact with and report on these political leaders can also significantly influence individuals' views of political issues.

The news media's impact on American politics is so important that it has often been called the "fourth estate," a term harkening back to the British Parliament and implying an integral role for the press in government. This so-called fourth estate comprises a variety of entities, from traditional local news outlets to growing media corporations, and, increasingly, average citizens. It is evident in all facets of American life, from morning newspapers to nightly comedy news shows.

Though the form of the news media has changed significantly since our nation's founding, the media's informational and watchdog roles remain. This chapter traces the development of the news media in the United States, explores recent developments affecting the media, and considers how these changes influence politics and government.

## Roots of the News Media in the United States

### 14.1

Trace the historical development of the news media in the United States.

**T**he **mass media**—the entire array of organizations through which information is collected and disseminated to the general public—have become a colossal enterprise in the United States. The mass media include print sources, movies, TV, radio, and Internet-based material. Collectively, the mass media use broadcast, cable, satellite, and broadband technologies to distribute information that reaches every corner of the United States and the world. A powerful tool for both entertaining and educating the public, they reflect American society but are also the primary lens through which citizens view American culture and politics. The **news media**, one component of the larger mass media, provide new information about subjects of public interest and play a vital role in the political process.<sup>2</sup> Although often referred to as a large, impersonal whole, the media are made up of diverse personalities and institutions, and they form a spectrum of opinion. Through the various outlets composing the news media—from newspapers to social media sites—journalists inform the public, influence public opinion, and affect the direction of public policy in our democratic society.

Throughout American history, technological advances have had a major impact on the way in which Americans receive their news. High-speed presses and more cheaply produced paper made mass-circulation daily newspapers possible. The telegraph and then the telephone enabled easier and much faster newsgathering. When radio became widely available in the 1920s, millions of Americans could hear national politicians instead of merely reading about them. With TV—first introduced in the late 1940s, and nearly a universal fixture in U.S. homes by the early 1960s—citizens could see and hear political candidates and presidents. Now, with

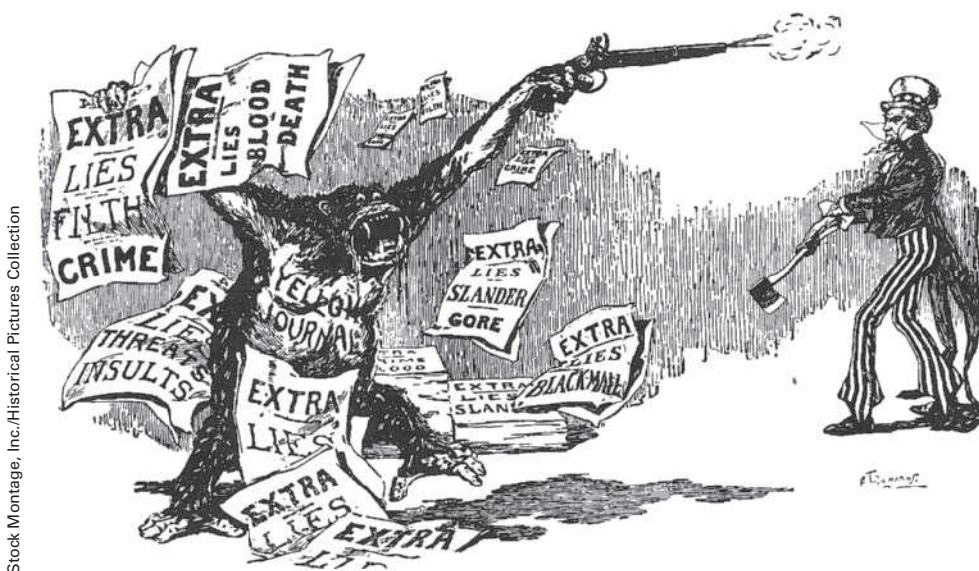
the rise of the Internet, access to information has once again changed form. Never before has information been more widely available, and never have the lines between news producer and consumer been less clear.

## □ Print Media

The first example of news media in America took the form of newspapers, which were published in the colonies as early as 1690. The number of newspapers grew throughout the 1700s, as colonists began to realize the value of a press free from government oversight and censorship. The battle between Federalists and Anti-Federalists over ratification of the Constitution played out in various partisan newspapers in the late eighteenth century. Thus, it came as no surprise that one of the Anti-Federalists' demands was a constitutional amendment guaranteeing freedom of the press.

The partisan press eventually gave way to the penny press. In 1833, Benjamin Day founded the *New York Sun*, which cost a penny at the newsstand. Beyond its low price, the *Sun* sought to expand its audience by freeing itself from the grip of a single political party. Inexpensive and politically independent, the *Sun* was the forerunner of modern newspapers, which relied on mass circulation and commercial advertising to produce profit. By 1861, the penny press had so supplanted partisan papers that President Abraham Lincoln announced his administration would have no favored or sponsored newspaper.

Although the print media were becoming less partisan, they were not necessarily gaining in respectability. Mass-circulation dailies sought wide readership, attracting customers with the sensational and the scandalous. The sordid side of politics became the entertainment of the times. One of the best-known examples occurred in the presidential campaign of 1884, when the *Buffalo Evening Telegraph* headlined “A Terrible Tale” about Grover Cleveland, the Democratic nominee.<sup>3</sup> The story alleged that Cleveland, an unmarried man, had fathered a child in 1871, while sheriff of Buffalo, New York. Even though paternity was indeterminate because the child’s mother had been seeing other men, Cleveland willingly accepted responsibility, since all the other men were married, and he dutifully paid child support for years. The strict Victorian moral code that dominated American values at the time made the story even more shocking than it would be today. Fortunately for Cleveland, another newspaper, the *Democratic Sentinel*, broke a story that helped offset this scandal: The



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### DID THE PRACTICE OF YELLOW JOURNALISM CONTRIBUTE TO THE RISE OF OBJECTIVE JOURNALISM?

In this 1898 cartoon titled “Uncle Sam’s Next Campaign—the War Against the Yellow Press,” yellow journalism is attacked for its threats, insults, filth, grime, blood, death, slander, gore, and blackmail. The cartoon was published in the wake of the Spanish-American War, and the cartoonist suggests that, having won the war abroad, the government ought to attack yellow journalists at home.

**yellow journalism**

A form of newspaper publishing in vogue in the late nineteenth century that featured pictures, comics, color, and sensationalized news coverage.

**muckraking**

A form of journalism, in vogue in the early twentieth century, devoted to exposing misconduct by government, business, and individual politicians.

first child of Republican presidential nominee James G. Blaine and his wife had been born just three months after their wedding.

Throughout the nineteenth century, payoffs to the press were common. Andrew Jackson, for instance, gave one in ten of his early appointments to loyal reporters.<sup>4</sup> During the 1872 presidential campaign, the Republicans slipped cash to about 300 newsmen.<sup>5</sup> Wealthy industrialists also sometimes purchased investigative cease-fires for tens of thousands of dollars.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, prominent publishers such as William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer expanded the reach of newspapers in their control by practicing what became pejoratively known as **yellow journalism**, perhaps because both Hearst and Pulitzer published a popular cartoon of the era called “The Yellow Kid.” Yellow journalism featured pictures, comics, color, and sensationalized news coverage. These innovations were designed to increase readership and capture a share of the burgeoning immigrant population.

The Progressive movement gave rise to a new type of journalism in the early 1920s. **Muckraking** journalists—so named by President Theodore Roosevelt after a special rake designed to collect manure—devoted themselves to exposing misconduct by government, business, and individual politicians.<sup>6</sup> For Roosevelt, muckraking was a derogatory term used to describe reporters who focused on the carnal underbelly of politics rather than its more lofty pursuits. Nevertheless, much good came from these efforts. Muckrakers stimulated demands for anti-trust regulations—laws that prohibit companies, such as large steel companies, from controlling an entire industry—and exposed deplorable working conditions in factories, as well as outright exploitation of workers by business owners. An unfortunate side effect of this emphasis on crusades and investigations, however, was the frequent publication of gossip and rumor without sufficient proof.

As the news business grew, so did the focus on increasing its profitability. Newspapers became more careful and less adversarial in their reporting, to avoid alienating the advertisers and readers who produced their revenues. Clearer standards were applied in evaluating the behavior of people in power. Journalism also changed during this period as the industry became more professionalized. Reporters learned to adhere to principles of objectivity and balance and to be motivated by a never-ending quest for the “truth.”<sup>7</sup>

More recently, faced by an onslaught of competing forms of media, including radio, TV, and the Internet, newspapers have struggled to maintain their circulation. Some print dailies have moved to online-print hybrids, eliminated less profitable publication days, or created subscription-only Web sites to monetize their content. For example, the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* has gone to a three-day-a-week model, and the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* has adopted an online-only format. Other papers have failed to adapt to the changing news environment. Since 2007, almost twenty major daily newspapers have completely ended their operations. The consequences of these changes for citizens’ knowledge of politics and public affairs—particularly among older Americans least likely to use new technology—remain to be seen, but the laws governing political communication in this country will likely need to be revisited.

## □ Radio News

The advent of radio in the early twentieth century was a media revolution and a revelation to the average American, who rarely, if ever, had heard the voice of a president, governor, or senator. The radio became the center of most homes in the evening, when national networks broadcast the news as well as entertainment shows. Calvin Coolidge was the first president to speak on radio on a regular basis, but President Franklin D. Roosevelt made the radio broadcast a must-listen by presenting “fireside chats” to promote his New Deal.

News radio, which had begun to take a back seat to TV by the mid-1950s, regained popularity with the advent of AM talk radio in the mid-1980s. Controversial radio host Rush Limbaugh began the trend with his unabashedly conservative views, opening the door for other conservative commentators such as Laura Ingraham, Sean Hannity, and

# The Living Constitution

*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. —FIRST AMENDMENT*

**T**he Framers knew that democracy is not easy, that a republic requires a continuous battle for rights and responsibilities. One of those rights is freedom of the press, preserved in the First Amendment to the Constitution. The Framers' view of the press, and its required freedom, however, was almost certainly less broad than our conception of press freedom today.

It is difficult to appreciate what a leap of faith it was for the Framers to grant freedom of the press when James Madison brought the Bill of Rights before Congress. Newspapers were largely run by disreputable people, since at the time editors and reporters were judged as purveyors of rumor and scandal.

But, the printed word was one of the few modes of political communication in the young nation—it was critical for keeping Americans informed about issues. Therefore, the Framers hoped that giving the press freedom to print all content, although certain to generate sensational stories, would also produce high-quality, objective reporting.

Not much has changed since the Framers instituted the free press. We still have tabloids and partisan publications in which politicians attack each other, and we still rely on the press to give us important political information that we use to make voting decisions. The simple, enduring protection the Framers created in the First Amendment continues to make possible the flow of ideas that a democratic society relies upon.

## CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. Should TV news, which relies on the spoken word, be afforded the same protections given to the written word? Why or why not?
2. How relevant to new media are the guarantees enshrined in the First Amendment? Do bloggers, for example, deserve the same constitutional protections as traditional journalists?

Glenn Beck. Statistics show that these conservative radio hosts resurrected the radio as a news medium by giving a strong ideological bent to the information they broadcast. Yet, most truly liberal political talk radio has struggled. Many liberals turn to National Public Radio (NPR), which receives government funding as well as private donations, and does not air solely political content. It also covers a variety of cultural and socially important issues. Studies of the overall political coverage of NPR, moreover, have failed to find any overt liberal bias.<sup>8</sup>

## □ TV News

TV was first demonstrated in the United States at the 1939 World's Fair in New York, but it did not take off as a news source until after World War II. While most homes had TVs by the early 1960s, it took several years more for TV to replace print and radio as the nation's chief news provider. In 1963, most networks provided just fifteen minutes of news per day; only two major networks devoted thirty minutes to news coverage. During this period, a substantial majority of Americans still received most of their news from newspapers. But, by 2011, most Americans received their news from TV or the Internet; this trend was particularly pronounced among young adults eighteen to twenty-four years old, who got the majority of their news from online sources.<sup>9</sup>

An important distinction exists between network and cable news stations. Network news has lost viewers over time. Cable news, however, has increased in viewership, due in large part to the greater availability of cable and satellite services providing twenty-four-hour news channels. Fox News is the most prominent of these channels, drawing an average of 1.1 million prime-time viewers in 2013, more than the next two largest competitors—CNN and MSNBC—combined.<sup>10</sup>

Cable and satellite providers also give consumers access to a less glitzy and more unfiltered source of news, C-SPAN, a basic cable channel that offers gavel-to-gavel coverage of congressional proceedings, as well as major political events when Congress is not in session. It also produces some of its own programming, such as *Washington Journal*, which invites scholars and journalists to speak about topics pertaining to their areas of expertise. Because the content of C-SPAN can be erudite, technical, and sometimes downright tedious (such as the fixed camera shot of the Senate during a roll-call vote), audiences tend to be very small, but they are loyal and give C-SPAN its place as a truly content-driven news source.

## □ Online Media

Online media, including Internet news, blogs, and social networking sites, are transforming the relationship between the media and citizens, even challenging our perceptions of what is defined as “media.” They also remove many of the traditional filters, such as editors and journalistic standards, which lend credibility to professional news outlets; moreover, they make media more low cost and widely accessible than ever before. The almost instantaneous availability of information through smartphones only enhances these changes.

**THE INTERNET** The Internet, which began as a Department of Defense project named Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPANET) in the late 1960s, has grown into an unprecedented source of public information for people throughout the world. In 2013, for example, 50 percent of Americans claimed the Internet was their main news source. This percentage—and the diversity of ways that individuals can access information—is growing annually. Smartphone apps and Web sites such as YouTube and Hulu only serve to increase the number of ways individuals can consume news online.<sup>11</sup>

**BLOGS** Blogs provide an editorial and news outlet for citizens. Increasingly, they are also an opportunity for news organizations to offer updates on emerging news stories, such as the *New York Times* blog, “The Caucus,” which gives updates on politics and government. Though blogs often offer more commentary than traditional news sources, they are also important informational tools, linking people with common ideological or issue-specific interests. Most political blogs, for example, are targeted to a sophisticated political elite that is already interested in and knowledgeable about public affairs.

While blogs and their user-generated content seem to offer people a more democratic means of engaging in public discussion, concern is growing that the blogosphere has become dominated by a small elite. Although over 173 million blogs can be found on the Web, only a very small number of sites have a sizeable audience and thus attract most of the advertising dollars available.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, most of the best-known political bloggers are graduates of the nation’s top colleges, and many have postgraduate degrees. And, the linking practices common on many blogs and Web sites mean that content produced by the top political bloggers often rises to the top, homogenizing the message received by political sophisticates and policy makers.<sup>13</sup>

**SOCIAL MEDIA** Although not their primary purpose, social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, serve as a resource for political news and information, and for finding others who share the same political views. Furthermore, politicians and candidates have increasingly used social networking sites to reach citizens and engage them in the political process. During the 2012 election, for example, social networking sites became home for a great deal of political debate. Supporters of presidential candidate Barack Obama, especially, established fan pages with

millions of Facebook friends. These sites then became ways to organize activists, raise money, and energize young voters.

Similarly, many local and national political leaders have also turned to Twitter to reach out to supporters and raise money for political campaigns. President Barack Obama has his own Twitter feeds, @whitehouse and @barackobama, which he uses for presidential and campaign purposes, respectively. In 2011, he used his @whitehouse account to hold an online town hall meeting, something he had previously done using both Facebook and YouTube. During this virtual meeting, the president fielded questions on issues such as national security and the economy, answering citizens' questions with responses that met Twitter's 140-character limit.<sup>14</sup>

With the online service Chirpify, candidates can also use Twitter (like text messaging) as a way to raise instantaneous money for their campaigns. All citizens have to do is set up a profile on Chirpify's site, and then they can make political donations by simply tweeting "Donate \$amount to @candidate for Election 2012."<sup>15</sup> The success of the platform fundraising tool has led Chirpify to expand into other online venues, including allowing users to purchase items directly from candidates' or friends' Instagram sites.

Average citizens, too, have used Twitter to spread political news. Users have tweeted from political rallies, offered commentary on the president's State of the Union Address, and used hashtags to mark political issues such as health care, jobs, and the economy as trending topics. Although many "tweeps" may not consider these actions political, they are, in fact, a part of politics.

Sites such as these fundamentally change the media. Politicians can interact directly with citizens, without using reporters and editors as intermediaries. Though this may seem more democratic, critics worry that a growing reliance on social networking sites will weaken the media's role as a filter, educator, and watchdog. They also express increasing concerns that politicians may not engage in deliberative democracy, but may instead make policy decisions designed to placate the mobs of citizens that James Madison and the Framers feared would trouble their republican form of government. One commentator, for example, has asked if there would have even been a Constitution if the Framers had tweeted the proceedings of the famously secret Philadelphia Convention.<sup>16</sup>

## Current News Media Trends

### 14.2 Characterize four major trends in the news media today.

**A** number of ongoing transformations define the news media today. Among these are the growth in corporate ownership and media consolidation; the targeting of programming at specific populations, known as narrowcasting; and infotainment. The people who deliver the news, too, have changed. Media news coverage today increasingly relies both on subject-matter experts and on average citizens.

Taken together, these changes create a news environment in which the boundaries between producers and consumers of news are increasingly blurred. Without the traditional lines of demarcation between news owners and objects of the news, and consumers and producers, the media's informational and watchdog roles are at risk of compromise.

### □ Corporate Ownership and Media Consolidation

Private ownership of the media in the United States has proved to be a mixed blessing. While private ownership ensures media independence, something that cannot be said



# Who Owns the News Media?

Since passage of the 1996 Telecommunications Act, media ownership has consolidated. Today, 90 percent of media outlets are owned by just six companies—Comcast, News Corporation, Disney, Viacom, Time Warner, and CBS. In the fall of 2014, the Federal Communications Commission reviewed the proposed \$45 billion acquisition of Time Warner by Comcast. If the merger is approved, Comcast will control about 40 percent of the U.S. wired broadband market and will expand its cable empire to serve 33 percent of all U.S. payTV homes. Consolidation has had consequences for how reporters cover stories, which stories do or do not receive attention, and, by extension, which issues policy makers prioritize.

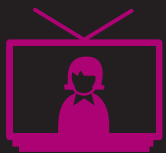
## The Media Has Never Been More Consolidated

1983

In 1983, 90% of American media was owned by 50 companies.



**Comcast** owns 15 television stations, NBC, Telemundo, E! Entertainment, NBC Sports, Hulu, and Universal Pictures.



**Disney** owns 10 television stations, 277 radio stations, ABC, ESPN, A&E, the History Channel, Lifetime, *Discover Magazine*, *Bassmaster Magazine*, Hyperion Publishing, Touchstone Pictures, Pixar Animation, and Miramax Film Corporation.



**Viacom** owns 10 television stations such as Comedy Central, BET, Nickelodeon, TV Land, MTV, VH1, and Paramount Pictures.

**CBS** owns 30 TV stations, Smithsonian Channel, Showtime, The Movie Channel, and Paramount Network Television.

SOURCE: Data from Common Cause, [www.commoncause.org](http://www.commoncause.org).

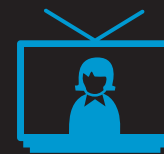
2012

In 2012, that same 90% is controlled by 6 companies.



**News Corp.** owns 27 television stations, the Fox Network and Fox News Channel, FX, National Geographic Channel, the *Wall Street Journal*, *TV Guide*, the *New York Post*, DirecTV, HarperCollins Publishers, Twentieth Century Fox, and MySpace.

**Time Warner** owns HBO, CNN, the Cartoon Network, Warner Bros., *Time Magazine*, Turner Broadcasting, and DC Comics.



### CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. How might Comcast's and General Electric's ownership of the NBC family of networks alter the way that reporters with NBC news cover particular stories?
2. How would the further consolidation of these conglomerates affect access to and public consumption of the media?
3. Should the government take action to end media consolidation? Why or why not?

about state-controlled media in countries such as China, it also brings market pressures to journalism that do not exist in state-run systems. The news media in the United States are multi-billion-dollar, for-profit businesses that ultimately are driven by the bottom line. As with all free market enterprises, the pressure in privately owned media is to increasingly consolidate media ownership, to reap the benefits that come from larger market shares and fewer large-scale competitors.

Consequently, the top six media chains account for more than 90 percent of news media content. Large media conglomerates such as Gannett, Media News Group, and News Corporation own most daily newspapers; fewer than 300 of the approximately 1,400 daily newspapers are independently owned. Only one of the three original TV networks—CBS—remains an independent entity: Comcast owns NBC, and Disney owns ABC. In radio, Cox Communications and Clear Channel far outpace their competitors in terms of both stations and audience.

Unlike traditional industries, in which the primary concern associated with consolidation is price manipulation, consolidation of the media poses far greater potential risks. As the media have increasingly become dominated by a few mega-corporations, observers have grown fearful that these groups could limit the flow of information and ideas that define the essence of a free society and that make democracy possible. These profit-driven media chains, aimed at expanding market shares and pleasing advertisers, may overwhelmingly focus on sensational issues and avoid those that could alienate their audiences, anger executives, or compromise relationships with government regulators. Former *CBS Evening News* anchor Dan Rather, for example, summarizes media consolidation's threat to democracy by saying, "These large corporations, they have things they need from the power structure in Washington, whether it's Republican or Democrat, and of course the people in Washington have things they want the news to report. To put it bluntly, very big business is in bed with very big government in Washington, and has more to do with what the average person sees, hears, and reads than most people know."<sup>17</sup>

## □ Narrowcasting

In recent years, fierce competition to attract viewers and the availability of additional TV channels made possible by cable and satellite TV have led media outlets to move toward **narrowcasting**—targeting media programming at specific populations within society. Within the realm of cable news, MSNBC and Fox News are most notable for engaging in this form of niche journalism. The two stations divide audiences by ideology. Fox News emphasizes a conservative viewpoint, and MSNBC stresses a more liberal perspective.

Audiences also divide along partisan lines over other news sources. Republicans, for example, are more likely than Democrats and Independents to listen to AM talk radio.<sup>18</sup> And, while only a small disparity in newspaper reading exists between Republicans and Democrats, newspapers can be categorized by ideology; for instance, the *Washington Times* offers more conservative fare than its rival, the *Washington Post* (see Table 14.1). As a result, political scientists have found that simply knowing where someone gets his or her news can predict party affiliation.<sup>19</sup>

Other narrowcasting targets specific racial, ethnic, or religious groups. Examples include Spanish-language news programs on stations such as Univision and Telemundo, as well as news programming geared toward African American viewers on cable's Black Entertainment Television (BET). For evangelical Christians, Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN), with its flagship *700 Club*, has been narrowcasting news for over forty years. The rising use of smartphones and mobile apps, too, has helped narrowcasting to grow.

While narrowcasting can promote the interests specific to segments of the population, especially racial and ethnic minorities who may ordinarily be left out of mainstream media coverage, it comes with a social cost. Narrowcasting increases the chance that group members will rely on news that appeals to their preexisting views.

### narrowcasting

Targeting media programming at specific populations within society.

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14.2

14.3

14.4

14.5

**TABLE 14.1** HOW DO MEDIA OUTLETS RELATE TO PARTY AFFILIATION?

Regularly watch/ read/listen to...	Total %	Republican %	Democrat %	Independent %
Local TV news	50	51	54	48
Daily newspaper	40	45	41	38
Community papers	30	35	30	30
Network evening news	28	27	30	27
Fox News	23	40	15	20
Morning shows	20	18	26	17
CNN	18	12	25	17
Sunday morning shows	11	11	13	11
NPR	11	6	14	14
MSNBC	11	6	16	10
News blogs	9	10	10	9
News magazines	8	7	10	8
CNBC	8	6	11	6
<i>The Daily Show</i>	7	4	9	8
<i>Glenn Beck Program</i>	7	14	2	7
<i>The Colbert Report</i>	6	3	7	7
<i>The New York Times</i>	5	2	8	6
<i>Rush Limbaugh Show</i>	5	13	2	4
<i>USA Today</i>	4	6	4	4
<i>Wall Street Journal</i>	4	6	3	5
C-SPAN	4	3	5	3
<i>The Rachel Maddow Show</i>	3	1	4	3

**SOURCE:** Pew Research Center, "Americans Spend More Time Following News," (September 12, 2010): <http://www.people-press.org/2010/09/12/section-1-watching-reading-and-listening-to-the-news/>.

By limiting one's exposure to a broad range of information or competing views, narrowcasting could result in further polarization of public opinion. The polarization made possible by narrowcasting is particularly problematic when it comes to programs that are narrowcasted in a specific ideological direction.<sup>20</sup> These broadcasts may result in what has been called the "Fox effect" or the "CNN effect." These effects result when a network chooses an ideologically favorable storyline—true or untrue—to cover almost *ad nauseam*. In so doing, the network sets the agenda both for partisans, who adopt the storyline being sold, and for other news networks, who feel compelled to address the issue.<sup>21</sup>

Narrowcasting also enables political leaders to avoid particularly hard-hitting news reporters. For example, a Republican candidate may avoid the historically tough questions asked by Sunday morning talk shows such as *Meet the Press* and *Face the Nation*, and choose instead to appear on Fox News, which features a more friendly audience and a comparatively easy-going moderator. This strategy may have electoral consequences, as it limits the visibility of such candidates to people who were already likely supporters, but nonetheless is increasingly popular.<sup>22</sup>

## □ Infotainment

Infotainment—or TV programming that blends political news and information with entertainment—has exploded as a way for citizens to engage with the political process. Different forms of infotainment exist, including late night comedy shows, daytime talk shows, and comedy news shows.

Late night comedy shows, such as *Saturday Night Live* and those hosted by Jay Leno and David Letterman, have mocked politicians and the news for years. What is

new, however, is that political leaders have embraced these programs as a way to connect with citizens, both on the campaign trail and while in office. During the 2012 presidential campaign, for example, *Saturday Night Live* sketches spoofed a wide variety of political themes, including the presidential debates, uninformed voters, and the government's response to Hurricane Sandy. And, President Barack and First Lady Michelle Obama have appeared on a number of late night talk shows, including the *Late Show with David Letterman* and *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon*. On Fallon's show, President Obama even slow-jammed the news, and the first lady challenged the host to an obstacle course race through the White House.

Daytime talk shows have also entered the political game. The president and first lady have been frequent guests on these programs, on which they have promoted policy initiatives such as the first lady's "Let's Move" campaign. President Obama also announced his 2008 run for the presidency on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Even cable news channels have attempted to create shows that follow the talk show format; Fox News's *The Five* is an example of this phenomenon.

Political leaders see many advantages to appearing on late night and talk shows. These soft news programs give politicians an opportunity to reach much larger and more diverse audiences than do Sunday morning talk shows or cable news channels. In addition, the questions asked by hosts of *Live! With Kelly and Michael* or *The Today Show* are often less technical and hard-hitting than those asked by the traditional news media. And, for a charismatic official, such as President Obama or President Bill Clinton, infotainment programs may also provide a venue to humanize the politician and make viewers connect with him or her on a more personal level.

In addition, the emergence of comedy news shows such as Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show* and Stephen Colbert's *The Colbert Report*—which originated as a satire of Fox News's *The O'Reilly Factor*—has also changed the way Americans receive their political news. These shows present news "freed from the media's preoccupation with balance, the fixation with fairness. They have no obligation to deliver the day's most important news, if that news is too depressing, too complicated or too boring. Their sole allegiance is to comedy."<sup>23</sup> As a result, many viewers find news presented by Stewart or Colbert to be more palatable, and more entertaining, than what they might view on a nightly network news show. The shows are especially popular news sources among younger Americans, who are often jaded by the conventions of traditional journalism and politics.

Infotainment, overall, makes political news and events more accessible to Americans. But, research has shown that the effects of infotainment may be clearest for highly attentive citizens. Watching soft news about politics makes sophisticates' political behavior more consistent. In essence, for these people, infotainment acts as an information shortcut that helps them to better remember facts and figures about the governmental process.<sup>24</sup> The effects of infotainment on less sophisticated audiences, however, are not as clear. Some less politically engaged citizens may also fail to find humor in shows like *Saturday Night Live*'s political coverage or *The Daily Show* because they lack the context in which to process the information provided by the programming; these citizens, however, may connect with a show like *The View*.

## □ Increasing Use of Experts

Most journalists know a little bit about many subjects but do not specialize in any one area and certainly do not possess enough knowledge to fill the hours of airtime made possible by cable TV's twenty-four-hour news cycle. Therefore, especially on cable stations, the news media employ expert consultants from a number of different disciplines ranging from medical ethics to political campaigning. These experts, also referred to as pundits, or the more derogatory term "talking heads," are hired to discuss the dominant issues of the day. For example, during the 2012 presidential campaign, one could not turn on the TV or read a newspaper without encountering a stable full of government officials, campaign consultants, former candidates, academics, and other experts giving their thoughts about the upcoming election.



#### HOW DO EXPERTS INFLUENCE NEWS COVERAGE?

Pundits bring a sense of credibility and experience to their political commentary. However, the reliance on these experts may blur the lines between producers and consumers of news and weaken democratic deliberation. Here, Republican strategist Ed Gillespie and TV host Rachel Maddow appear on *Meet the Press* with David Gregory.

#### **citizen journalists**

Ordinary individuals who collect, report, and analyze news content.

Experts have a significant impact on how we view political news stories. One study, for example, finds that “news from experts or research studies is estimated to have almost as great an impact” as anchorpersons, reporters in the field, or special commentators. These “strong effects by commentators and experts are compatible with a picture of a public that engages in collective deliberation and takes expertise seriously.”<sup>25</sup>

However, two main concerns arise about the increasing use of experts in news reporting. First, it is unclear how objective these experts are. Many of the pundits on air during the presidential campaign, for example, had ties to one of the two major candidates. Others were political operatives closely connected to the Democratic and Republican parties and to members of Congress. Second, so-called experts may weaken democratic deliberation, even though they are not particularly accurate in their predictions. But, because many pundits have official-sounding titles such as “strategist” or “former administration official,” viewers assign privilege to experts’ beliefs and do not take time to form their own political opinions. In many cases, the educated evaluations of citizens would be as accurate as the “expert” opinions they hear on TV or read in newspapers.<sup>26</sup>

### **□ Citizen Journalists**

In the past, only professionals whose occupation was to cover current events filed news reports. Today, however, much of what we call “news” content is written and filmed by amateur **citizen journalists**, ordinary individuals who collect, report, and analyze news content.

Many citizen journalists use the Internet as a way to reach an interested news audience. Sites such as Associated Content may cover a broad range of issues. Other sites, such as local news and politics blogs, focus on niche issues and local events, such as town meetings, school closings, and recycling initiatives, that often are left out of larger publications. Uploading videos to YouTube may also allow citizens to showcase content not covered by traditional news outlets or provide a location to share common

experiences, such as natural disasters. Citizens may also tweet narratives or opinions about newsworthy occurrences.

Many traditional news organizations have embraced the value of citizen journalism. In addition to bringing new perspectives—and perhaps new readers and viewers—into the fold, citizen journalists may reach the scene of important events before news crews. Citizen journalism also has financial benefits for traditional news outlets: using citizen coverage and footage is far cheaper than hiring reporters. This can be a way for news outlets to continue offering coverage of a broad range of issues in an era of decreasing budgets.

Media scholars have hotly debated the value of citizen journalism. On one hand, citizen journalism can act as a democratizing force, allowing more people to participate in setting agendas and framing issues. It can also give more instantaneous coverage than traditional media. On the other hand, citizen journalists are often not trained in the rules and standards of journalism. They may not treat their sources with the same respect or fact-check as thoroughly as professional reporters. Perhaps as a result, research has shown that consumers of citizen journalism score lower on political knowledge than those who rely on professional news organizations.<sup>27</sup> Finally, and perhaps most importantly, citizen journalists once again blur the line between producers and consumers of news, compromising the objectivity of news coverage.

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**on the record**

Information provided to a journalist that can be released and attributed by name to the source.

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**off the record**

Information provided to a journalist that will not be released to the public.

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**on background**

Information provided to a journalist that will not be attributed to a named source.

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**deep background**

Information provided to a journalist that will not be attributed to any source.

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## Rules Governing the News Media

### 14.3 Summarize the ethical standards and federal regulations that govern the news media.

**P**rofessional journalists may obtain and publish information in a number of ways. They are, however, subject to boundaries in this pursuit. Journalists are primarily limited by the ethical standards of their profession. In some cases, additional governmental regulations may apply.

### Journalistic Standards

The heaviest restrictions placed on reporters come from the industry's own professional norms and each journalist's level of integrity, as well as from oversight by editors who are ultimately responsible for the accuracy of the news they produce. To guide the ethical behavior of journalists, the Society of Professional Journalists publishes a detailed "Code of Ethics" that includes principles and standards governing issues such as avoiding conflicts of interest and verifying the information being reported.

One dilemma faced by reporters is how to deal ethically with sources. Informants may speak to reporters in a number of ways. If a session is **on the record**, as in a formal press conference, every word an official utters can be printed. In contrast, a journalist may obtain information **off the record**, which means that nothing the official says may be printed. Reporters may also obtain information **on background**, meaning that none of the information can be attributed to the source by name. Whereas background talks can be euphemistically attributed to sources, such as "unnamed senior officials," information on **deep background** must be completely unsourced, with the reporter giving the reader no hint about the origin. When reporters obtain information in any of these ways, they must take care to respect their source's wishes. Otherwise, not only might that person refuse to talk to them in the future, but other potential sources may do the same.

Journalists also grapple with the competitive nature of the news business. The pressure to get the story right is often weighed against the pressure to get the story first, or at the very least to get it finished before the next deadline. The twenty-four-hour news



#### HOW DO JOURNALISTS USE INFORMATION OBTAINED ON DEEP BACKGROUND?

W. Mark Felt, former associate director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, shown here on *Face the Nation*, spoke to *Washington Post* reporters on deep background during the Watergate scandal. Known only as “Deep Throat,” Felt provided information crucial to linking the Richard M. Nixon administration to the break-in at the Watergate Hotel. His true identity was not revealed for more than thirty years, when he went public in 2005.

cycle, brought to life by cable news stations and nourished by the expansion of online media, has heightened the pressure to produce interesting copy in a timely manner.

To ensure professional integrity, several major newspapers and magazines, including the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, have hired internal media critics, or ombudsmen, who assess how well their newspaper and its reporters are performing their duties. Some nonprofits, such as the Project for Excellence in Journalism and the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press in Washington, D.C., conduct scientific studies of the news and entertainment media. Other groups, including the conservative watchdog group Accuracy in Media (AIM) and its liberal counterpart Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), critique news stories and attempt to set the record straight on important issues they believe have received biased coverage. All of these organizations have a role in making sure the media treat topics important to citizens in a fair and objective manner.

### □ Government Regulations

The U.S. government regulates media in a number of ways. Some regulations apply to all forms of media. Libel and slander, for example, are illegal in all cases. The Constitution also places a limit on prior restraint—that is, the government may not limit any speech or publications before they actually occur. This principle was clearly affirmed in *New York Times Co. v. U.S.* (1971).<sup>28</sup> In this case, the Supreme Court ruled that the government could not prevent publication by the *New York Times* of the Pentagon Papers, classified government documents about the Vietnam War that had been photocopied and sent to the *Times* and the *Washington Post* by Daniel Ellsberg, a government employee. “Only a free and unrestrained press can effectively expose deception in the government,” Justice Hugo Black wrote in a concurring opinion for the Court. “To find that the President has ‘inherent power’ to halt the publication of news by resort to the courts would wipe out the First Amendment.”

Government can, however, regulate electronic media such as radio or TV more heavily than print content. Two reasons account for this unequal treatment. First, the airwaves used by the electronic media are considered public property and are leased by the federal government to private broadcasters. Second, those airwaves are in limited supply; without some regulation, the nation's many radio and TV stations would interfere with one another's frequency signals. The scope of government regulation of the Internet remains unclear and has been debated hotly in recent years. Government regulations of electronic media apply in two major areas: ownership and content.

**MEDIA OWNERSHIP** In 1996, Congress passed the sweeping Telecommunications Act, deregulating whole segments of the electronic media. The Telecommunications Act sought to provide an optimal balance of competing corporate interests, technological innovations, and consumer needs. It appeared to offer limitless opportunities for entrepreneurial companies to give consumers enhanced services. This deregulation, however, resulted in the sudden merger of previously distinct kinds of media in order to create a more “multimedia” approach to communicating information and entertainment. This merger paved the way for the formation of multimedia corporations such as Viacom, and Comcast and the media consolidation.

Since the initial passage of this act, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has continued to relax ownership standards, leading to even greater media consolidation. Today, a single company may own up to 45 percent of media in a given market. Whether a media conglomerate may own both a newspaper and a TV station in a single market, however, continues to be fiercely debated.

**CONTENT** The government also subjects the electronic media to substantial **content regulations**, or limitations on the substance of the mass media. To ensure that the airwaves “serve the public interest, convenience, and necessity,” the FCC has attempted to promote equity in broadcasting. For example, the **equal time rule** requires that broadcast stations sell air time equally to all candidates in a political campaign if they choose to sell it to any, which they are under no obligation to do. An exception to this rule is a political debate: stations may exclude from this event less well known and minor-party candidates.

The emergence of the Internet has posed new regulatory challenges. One of the foremost concerns has centered on protecting intellectual property and making the Internet a profitable means for distributing content. Preventing free distribution of copyrighted content, especially music and movies, has been the locus of concern.

Internet service providers (ISPs) attempted to limit users' access to this content, slowing the network connections of those suspected of using illegal file-sharing programs. But, following more than a decade of controversy, the FCC ruled in November 2011 that ISPs may not block or slow the transmission of legal content. This Open Internet, or “net neutrality” rule, was a victory for Web-based companies such as Google and Yahoo, which argued that any other ruling would infringe on users' First Amendment rights.

Congressional actions to limit online piracy, however, have continued in earnest. In early 2012, controversy arose over two similar pieces of legislation—the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) and the PROTECT IP Act (PIPA). These acts, which were supported by content producers such as the Recording Industry Association of America and the Motion Picture Association of America, would have given officials the power to shutter entire Internet domains if federal law enforcement officers suspected they were infringing on copyright laws. Opponents of the law, concerned that the government could potentially have the power to shut down any Web site at will, feared the consequences of such a mandate. An Internet “blackout” led by online content providers such as Wikipedia and Google raised citizens' awareness of these bills. During early January 2012, Google estimates that more than 7 million people petitioned Congress, asking members to vote against SOPA and PIPA, ultimately leading to the defeat of both pieces of legislation.<sup>29</sup>

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### content regulations

Limitations on the substance of the mass media.

14.1

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### equal time rule

The rule that requires broadcast stations to sell air time equally to all candidates in a political campaign if they choose to sell it to any.

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14.1

**press release**

A document offering an official comment or position.

14.2

**press briefing**

A relatively restricted session between a press secretary or aide and the press.

14.3

**press conference**

An unrestricted session between an elected official and the press.

14.4

14.5

# How the News Media Cover Politics

## 14.4 Assess how the news media cover politics.



he news media focus an extraordinary amount of attention on politicians and the day-to-day operations of government. In 2012, more than 3,300 reporters were members of the House Radio-Television Correspondents Gallery, which serves as the newsroom for members of the media who cover the House of Representatives.<sup>30</sup> The media have a visible presence at the White House as well; these reporters come from traditional and online media outlets and hail from across the country and, increasingly, around the world. Consequently, the media report, then intensively scrutinize and interpret, a politician's every public utterance.

### □ How the Press and Public Figures Interact

Communication between elected officials or public figures and the media takes a number of different forms. A **press release**, also called a news release, is a written document offering an official comment or position on an issue or news event; it is usually faxed, e-mailed, or handed directly to reporters. A **press briefing** is a relatively restricted live engagement with the press, with the range of questions limited to one or two specific topics. In a press briefing, a press secretary or aide represents the elected official or public figure, who does not appear in person. In a full-blown **press conference**, an elected official appears in person to talk with the press at great length about an unrestricted range of topics. Press conferences provide a field on which reporters struggle to obtain the answers they need and public figures attempt to retain control of their message and spin the news and issues in ways favorable to them.

Politicians and media interact in a variety of other ways as well. Politicians hire campaign consultants who use focus groups and polling in an attempt to gauge how to present the candidate to the media and to the public. In addition, politicians can attempt to bypass the national news media through paid advertising and by appearing on talk shows and local news programs. Politicians also use the media to attempt to retain a high level of name recognition and to build support for their ideological and policy ideas.

### □ Covering the Presidency

The three branches of the U.S. government—the executive, the legislative, and the judicial—are roughly equal in power and authority. But, in the world of media coverage, the president stands first among equals. The White House beat is one of the most prestigious posts a political reporter can hold. Many of the most famous network news anchors, including NBC's Brian Williams, got their start covering the presidency.

The attention of the press to the White House enables a president to appear even on very short notice and to televise live, interrupting regular programming. The White House's press briefing room is a familiar sight on the evening news, not just because presidents use it fairly often but also because the presidential press secretary has almost daily question and answer sessions there.

The post of press secretary to the president has existed only since Herbert Hoover's administration (1929–1933). The power of this position, however, has grown tremendously over time. Presidents increasingly resist facing the media on their own and leave this task to their press secretary. As a result, press secretaries have a difficult job; they must convince the media of the importance of the president's policy decisions as well as defend any actions taken by the executive branch. In many ways, the prestige and power of the presidency depend on the “spin” of the press secretary and

# Take a Closer Look

The James S. Brady Press Briefing Room is a central part of the president’s media outreach efforts. Each day, the press secretary meets with members of the media in this room. Reporters have the opportunity to ask questions about presidential policies and activities, which they then report to their viewers, readers, and listeners. Seat assignments in the briefing room—which the White House Correspondents Association makes—have a significant impact on a news agency’s ability to be recognized by the press secretary and ask the hard-hitting questions.

The front row, center seat, long reserved for UPI reporter Helen Thomas, is considered the “best seat in the house” because of its proximity to the press secretary. Today, the Associated Press takes this seat.

The press secretary stands at a podium in the front of the room, facing reporters. Shown here is President Obama’s second press secretary, Jay Carney.



**Brady Briefing Room Seating Chart**  
As of September 2012

1	National Broadcasting Company	Fox News	Columbia Broadcasting System	Associated Press	American Broadcasting Company	Reuters	Cable News Network
2	Wall Street Journal	Columbia Broadcasting System Radio	Bloomberg	National Public Radio	Washington Post	New York Times	Associated Press Radio
3	Agence France Presse	USA Today	McClatchy	American Urban Radio Networks	Politico	Tribune	ABC Radio
4	Foreign Pool	Microsoft and the National Broadcasting System	Washington Times	New York Daily News	National Journal	Voice of America	Congress Daily
5	Newsweek	Time	The Hill	Hearst	New York Post	Fox Radio	Chicago Sun-Times
6	Washington Examiner	CCH/United Press International	Salem Radio	Media News Group	Christian Science Monitor	Bureau of National Affairs	Dow Jones
7	Talk Radio	Dallas Morning News	Boston Globe/Roll Call	Christian Broadcasting Network	Baltimore Sun/British Broadcasting Corporation	Scripps	Financial Times

Occupying seats farther from the press secretary are foreign news outlets, such as the BBC, and comparatively small daily newspapers, such as the *Dallas Morning News*.

## CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. What news outlets are you surprised to see seated in the White House press room? What news outlets are missing?
2. How does a daily press briefing help to keep citizens informed and the president accountable?
3. Should the president have to face the media on a daily basis, rather than sending his press secretary? Why or why not?

his or her ability to win over the media. Thus, many presidents choose close aides with whom they have worked previously and who are familiar with their thinking. For example, President Barack Obama's second press secretary, Jay Carney, worked as Vice President Joe Biden's director of communications before being appointed press secretary in 2011.

## □ Covering Congress

With 535 voting members representing distinct geographic areas, covering Congress poses a difficult challenge for the media. Most news organizations solve the size and decentralization problems by concentrating coverage on three groups of individuals. First, the leaders of both parties in both chambers receive the lion's share of attention because only they can speak for a majority of their party's members. Usually, the majority and minority leaders in each house and the Speaker of the House are the preferred spokespersons, but the whips also receive a substantial share of air time and column inches. Second, key committee chairs command center stage when subjects in their domain are newsworthy. Heads of the most prominent committees (such as Appropriations or Judiciary) are guaranteed frequent coverage, but even the chairs and members of minor committees or subcommittees can achieve fame when the time and issue are right. For example, a sensational scandal may lead to congressional committee hearings that receive extensive media coverage. Third, local newspapers and broadcast stations normally devote some



### HOW DOES THE MEDIA COVER THE SUPREME COURT?

TV cameras are not allowed inside the Supreme Court. As a result, when the Court hands down an important opinion, such as its health care decision in 2012, it is not uncommon to see journalists sprinting from the courtroom with draft opinions in hand, hoping to be the first news agency to report the Court's decision.

resources to covering local senators and representatives, even when these legislators are junior and relatively lacking in influence.

As with coverage of the president, media coverage of Congress is disproportionately negative. A significant segment of media attention given to the House and Senate focuses on conflict among members. Some political scientists believe that such reporting is at least partially responsible for the public's negative perceptions of Congress.<sup>31</sup>

## □ Covering the Supreme Court

While the president and Congress interact with the media on a regular basis, the Supreme Court remains a virtual media vacuum. TV cameras have never been permitted to record Supreme Court proceedings. Print and broadcast reporters, however, are granted access to the Court. Still, fewer than a dozen full-time reporters cover the Supreme Court, and the amount of space dedicated to Court-related news has continued to shrink. Stories involving complex legal issues are not as easy to sell as well-illustrated stories dealing with the Congress or president.<sup>32</sup>

The justices, citing the need to protect the public's perception of the Supreme Court as a nonpolitical and autonomous entity, have given little evidence to suggest they are eager to become more media friendly. Many veteran reporters have criticized this decision. As longtime Court reporter Tony Mauro noted, "Of course we don't want the Supreme Court playing to the crowd, ruling to please the majority. But that does not mean the [C]ourt should be invisible and unaccountable. Clarence Thomas on *Face the Nation*? John Roberts taking questions posted on YouTube? Sam Alito blogging? Why not? Really, why not?"<sup>33</sup>

# Toward Reform: News Media Influence, News Media Bias, and Public Confidence

**14.5** Evaluate the influence of the news media on public policy and the impact of media bias.

**M**any important questions pertain to the news media's relationship with the public. For instance, how much influence do the media actually have on the public's understanding of political issues? Do the media have a discernible ideological bent or bias, as some people suggest? Are people able to resist information that is inconsistent with their preexisting beliefs? And, how much confidence does the public have in the news media?

## □ News Media Influence

Some political scientists argue that the content of news coverage accounts for a large portion of the volatility and changes in public opinion and voting preferences of Americans, when measured over relatively short periods of time.<sup>34</sup> These changes are called **media effects**. These effects may be visible in a number of ways.

First, the media can influence the list of issues to be addressed by government through a process known as **agenda setting**. Significant media attention to an issue often increases the salience of that issue with average citizens. These citizens then pressure the government to take action. For example, media coverage of an immigration law enacted by the state of Arizona in 2010 ignited citizens' passions about the matter and made it a hot topic in many congressional campaigns.

### media effects

The influence of news sources on public opinion.

14.1

### agenda setting

The process of forming the list of issues to be addressed by government.

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# Explore Your World

The media act as a filter for citizens' comprehension of political issues, helping them determine which issues are important and fashioning the frame for understanding. However, even the same political event may receive dramatically different coverage, depending on the country and context of the reporters shaping the story. Examine these front pages from around the world on the day after the U.S. military killed Osama bin Laden.



The *New York Daily News*, a tabloid-style paper famous for its sometimes clever and often sensational headlines, declared simply, "Rot in Hell."



A French-language newspaper in Dakar, Senegal featured a fake illustration of Osama bin Laden. Roughly translated, the headline declares that [President George W.] Bush looked for bin Laden, but [President Barack] Obama found him.



English language newspapers in Pakistan, the country where bin Laden was ultimately captured and killed, report the al Qaeda leader's death with a local focus, noting that "Even in death, Osama haunts Pakistan."

## CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. How are the front pages similar and different? Why do you think these similarities and differences exist?
2. How does each of these front pages affect the political and cultural viewpoints of the country in which they originated?
3. How do you think media in each of these countries affected public opinion and policy making in their countries?

Second, the media influence public opinion through **framing**—the process by which a news organization defines a political issue and consequently affects opinion about the issue. For example, an experiment conducted by one group of scholars found that if a news story about a Ku Klux Klan rally was framed as a civil rights story (i.e., a story about the right of a group to express its ideas, even if they are unpopular), viewers were generally tolerant of the rally. However, if the story was framed as a law and order issue (i.e., a story about how the actions of one group disrupted a community and threatened public safety), public tolerance for the rally decreased. In either case, the media exert subtle influence over the way people respond to the same information.<sup>35</sup>

Third, the media have the power to indirectly influence the way the public views politicians and government. For example, voters' choices in presidential elections often relate to their assessments of the economy. In general, a healthy economy motivates voters to reelect the incumbent president, whereas a weak economy impels them to choose the challenger. Hence, if the media paint a consistently dismal picture of the economy, that picture may well hurt the incumbent president seeking reelection.

Fourth, reporting can sway the public opinion and votes of people who lack strong political beliefs. So, for example, the media have a greater influence on political independents than on strong partisans.<sup>36</sup> That said, the sort of politically unmotivated individual who is subject to media effects may be less likely to engage in political affairs, in which case the media's influence may be more limited.

Finally, the media likely have a greater impact on topics far removed from the lives and experiences of readers and viewers. News reports can probably shape public opinion about events in foreign countries somewhat easily. Yet, what the media say about domestic issues, such as rising food or gas prices, neighborhood crime, or child rearing, may have relatively little effect, because most citizens have personal experience of, and well-formed ideas about, these subjects.

## □ News Media Bias

Are journalists biased? The answer is simple and unavoidable. Of course they are. Journalists, like all human beings, have values, preferences, and attitudes galore—some conscious, others subconscious, but all reflected at one time or another in the subjects covered or the portrayal of events or content communicated. Given that the press is biased, in what ways is it biased, and when and how are the biases shown?

Much of the debate over media bias in contemporary politics has centered on the ideological bias of the people who report the news. Historically, most journalists self-identified as liberal Democrats.<sup>37</sup> Today, however, the percentage of journalists who identify as Democrats is at an all-time low. The debate has now shifted to examining biases of the news business, as commentators increasingly ask whether media consolidation has produced a news environment biased toward corporations and conservative politics. These scholars point to the elite background of the typical journalist, who tends to be white, male, highly educated, and relatively affluent. As a result, many of these journalists, in their reporting, may unconsciously ignore issues important to racial and ethnic minorities, the poor, and others who might be critical of government and big business.<sup>38</sup> They may also look to different sources for expertise to enrich their reporting. One study of the 2012 election, for example, revealed that, even on issues of concern to women, male pundits were four to seven times more likely to be quoted by the news media than their female counterparts.<sup>39</sup>

At the end of the day, the deepest bias among political journalists is the desire to grab a good story. News people know that if they report news with spice and drama, they will increase their audience. The fear of missing a good story shapes how media outlets develop headlines and frame their stories.

In the absence of an intriguing story, news people may attempt to create a horse race where none exists. While the horse-race components of elections are intrinsically

### framing

The process by which a news organization defines a political issue and consequently affects opinion about the issue.

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interesting, the limited time that TV devotes to politics is disproportionately given to electoral competition, leaving less time for adequate discussion of public policy.<sup>40</sup> Looking at media coverage of the 2012 presidential primaries, one study found that only 9 percent of stories examined issue positions and candidate qualifications.<sup>41</sup>

One other source of bias, or at least of nonobjectivity, is the increasing celebrity status of many people who report the news. In an age of media stardom and blurring boundaries between entertainment and news, journalists in prominent media positions have unprecedented opportunities to attain fame and fortune. And, especially in the case of journalists with highly ideological perspectives, close involvement with wealthy or powerful special-interest groups can blur the line between reporting on policy issues and influencing them. Some journalists find work as political consultants or members of government—which seems reasonable, given their prominence, abilities, and expertise, but which can become problematic when they attempt to straddle both spheres. A good example of this phenomenon is Representative Michele Bachmann (R–MN), who ran for president in 2012 but who also frequently appears as a guest on cable news channels.

## □ Public Confidence

Americans' general assessment of the news media is considerably unfavorable and has trended downward since the 1980s. According to a 2011 survey by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, a majority of the public gives the media low ratings on a number of indicators. Pew, for example, found 66 percent believed that the press was often inaccurate, 77 percent believed that stories favored one side, and 80 percent believed that powerful people and organizations often influenced coverage. These figures reached their highest levels in two decades.<sup>42</sup>

Despite the increasing displeasure expressed by most Americans about these and other shortcomings, the media have managed to maintain higher approval ratings than other political institutions. Americans also continue to value the media's watchdog role, with 58 percent believing that press scrutiny keeps political leaders from wrongdoing.<sup>43</sup> Thus, while public confidence in media organizations has declined and reforms are certainly warranted, Americans have not wavered in their support for a vigorous free press and for the role of the media in a democratic society.

# Review the Chapter

## Roots of the News Media in the United States

**14.1** Trace the historical development of the news media in the United States, p.398.

News media, a component of the larger mass media, provide the public with key information about subjects of public interest and play a crucial role in the political process. The news media consist of print, broadcast, and new media. The nation's first newspaper was published in 1690. Until the mid- to late- 1800s, when independent papers first appeared, newspapers were partisan; that is, they openly supported a particular party. In the twentieth century, first radio in the late 1920s and then TV in the late 1940s revolutionized the transmission of political information. The growth of online media, such as the Internet, blogs, and social media sites, continues to transform the relationship between media and citizens.

## Current News Media Trends

**14.2** Characterize four major trends in the news media today, p. 403.

Five trends affecting the modern media are: (1) corporate ownership and increasing consolidation of media outlets; (2) narrowcasting in order to capture particular segments of the population; (3) the growth of infotainment; (4) the increasing use of experts; and, (5) the rise of citizen journalists—ordinary individuals who collect, report, and analyze news content. These trends have all altered the news content citizens receive.

## Rules Governing the News Media

**14.3** Summarize the ethical standards and federal regulations that govern the news media, p. 409.

Journalists are guided in ethical behavior by a detailed “Code of Ethics” published by the Society of Professional Journalists, which includes principles and standards concerning issues such as avoiding conflicts of interest, verifying the

information being reported, and dealing ethically with sources. In addition, the U.S. government regulates both media ownership and content. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 deregulated whole segments of the electronic media, paving the way for greater media consolidation. Content regulation such as network neutrality has also been a subject of significant government attention.

## How the News Media Cover Politics

**14.4** Assess how the news media cover politics, p. 412.

The news media cover every aspect of the political process, including the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government, though the bulk of attention focuses on the president. Congress, with its 535 members and complex committee system, poses a challenge to the modern media, as does the Supreme Court, with its legal rulings and aversion to media attention. Politicians have developed a symbiotic relationship with the media, both feeding the media a steady supply of news and occasionally being devoured by the latest media feeding frenzy.

## Toward Reform: News Media Influence, News Media Bias, and Public Confidence

**14.5** Evaluate the influence of the news media on public policy and the impact of media bias, p. 415.

By controlling the flow of information, framing issues in a particular manner, and setting the agenda, the media have the potential to exert influence over the public, though generally they have far less effect than people believe. While the media do possess biases, a wide variety of news options are available in the United States, providing news consumers with an unprecedented amount of information from which to choose. Public opinion regarding the media is largely critical, although Americans continue to value the news media's watchdog role.



## Learn the Terms



**Study** and **Review** the **Flashcards**

agenda setting, p. 415  
citizen journalists, p. 408  
content regulations, p. 411  
deep background, p. 409  
equal time rule, p. 411  
framing, p. 417

mass media, p. 398  
media effects, p. 415  
muckraking, p. 400  
narrowcasting, p. 405  
news media, p. 398  
off the record, p. 409

on background, p. 409  
on the record, p. 409  
press briefing, p. 412  
press conference, p. 412  
press release, p. 412  
yellow journalism, p. 400

## Test Yourself



**Study** and **Review** the **Practice Tests**

1. What form of journalism stimulated demands for anti-trust regulations?
  - a. Yellow journalism
  - b. Penny press
  - c. Muckraking
  - d. TV news
  - e. Radio news
2. Most people get their information about politics from
  - a. the radio.
  - b. newspapers.
  - c. social media.
  - d. the Internet.
  - e. TV.
3. Media consolidation has
  - a. led to fewer owners in the media sphere.
  - b. not been allowed by the U.S. Supreme Court.
  - c. led networks to refrain from any possible kind of bias.
  - d. led to more news and less entertainment.
  - e. led to a decline in narrowcasting.
4. The rise of citizen journalism has
  - a. improved the accuracy of press coverage.
  - b. democratized political news.
  - c. polarized public opinion.
  - d. decreased citizens' reliance on technology.
  - e. become an important part of infotainment.
5. TV and radio are regulated by the federal government because
  - a. their content may be offensive to some people.
  - b. TV and radio are considered dangerous to the spirit of democracy.
  - c. the airwaves are public property.
  - d. the Constitution allows it specifically.
  - e. media profits are not legally allowed to exceed certain levels.
6. Which of these forms of media faces the least government regulation?
  - a. TV
  - b. Radio
  - c. Internet
  - d. Social media
  - e. Newspapers
7. Much of the news media's attention to government focuses on
  - a. the president.
  - b. Congress.
  - c. the Supreme Court.
  - d. the bureaucracy.
  - e. interest groups.
8. The president's official liaison to the media is known as the
  - a. communications director.
  - b. public information officer.
  - c. press secretary.
  - d. public relations coordinator.
  - e. spokesperson.

**9.** The process of forming and shaping the list of issues addressed by government is known as

- a. agenda setting.
- b. media bias.
- c. public opinion.
- d. socialization.
- e. framing.

**10.** When covering campaigns, most journalists' deepest bias is

- a. a liberal bias.
- b. a conservative bias.
- c. a libertarian bias.
- d. a bias to get a good story.
- e. total objectivity.