
The Media

I. HISTORY, TYPES, AND STRUCTURE OF MODERN MEDIA

A. THE MEDIA AS A LINKAGE INSTITUTION

1. *Linkage institutions* (political parties, interest groups, elections, and the media) are formal organizations in society that connect people with the government and government with the people. Linkage institutions, including the media, create access points that allow people to connect with government.
 - a. The news media provides citizens with information about policy issues and government activities.
 - b. The media also provides the government with information about citizen attitudes and preferences that may impact policy issues on the government's agenda.
2. The press is sometimes called the fourth estate, a reference to the fact that the press is one of the most powerful and important institutions in society, tasked with advocating for the citizenry and influencing the political agenda.
3. In the Western democratic tradition, the independence of the press is vital.
 - a. It is not affiliated with the government, and its role as a linkage institution is considered essential to democracy.
 - b. In other political systems, the press may be an arm of the government and may serve primarily to disseminate official propaganda.

B. HISTORY OF MEDIA

1. The role of the media in American politics began in the Colonial Era when printing presses were used to publish newspapers that presented political news and events.

2. During the ratification debates, the *Federalist Papers* and *Brutus* essays were shared with the public through newspapers, making the competing views public.
3. From the beginning, a press with the freedom to publish information has been viewed as vital to democracy.
4. The First Amendment, which is understood as protecting the most important rights in a free society, explicitly protects both freedom of speech and freedom of the press.
5. As the media has evolved from print to broadcast to cable to Internet, it has played an increasing role in American political life.
 - a. Radio and television broadcasts during the twentieth century reached the vast majority of Americans and were dominated by a small number of news networks.
 - Market pressures to accurately report the news without offending a portion of the audience by taking partisan positions supported the practice of politically neutral, fact-based reporting.
 - News reports were overwhelmingly developed by professional journalists who adhered to accepted standards for accuracy and professional norms.
 - As a result, citizens received largely uniform information about news and politics.
 - b. In the late twentieth century, talk radio, which was losing market share to new forms of media, became more partisan and emotionally charged, influencing political discourse.
 - c. With the advent of cable news and the birth of the Internet, the news is now generated by a broader variety of outlets.
 - Recently created news networks, foreign news sources, social media platforms, and Internet news sources have vastly expanded the marketplace for news.
 - Some cable news channels present a strongly partisan view of the news in order to compete for viewership and advertising.
 - Partisan news sites style their coverage to appeal to consumers with particular ideologies and political beliefs.

C. THE MODERN MEDIA

1. The modern media includes various forms of information outlets, including newspapers and magazines, radio, television, Internet sources, and others, that provide information and programming content to a broad segment of society. The media provides not only news, but entertainment and information too.
2. The term *mainstream media* refers collectively to broad-based, influential news outlets that reach large numbers of people.
3. Social media, which includes such platforms as Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, YouTube, and weblogs (blogs), is a form of media that allows users to create online communities and share information. Social media has transformed political information in the twenty-first century.

D. REGULATION OF MEDIA

1. Americans have always recognized the crucial role played by the press in society and have regulated the content of print and broadcast media and the structure of media organizations.
2. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) was created by Congress in 1934 to regulate broadcast media on the premise that “the airwaves belong to the people.”
 - a. In order to broadcast, radio and television stations are required to maintain federal licensure, serve the public interest, and follow certain rules.
 - b. Broadcast media may be regulated to ensure that content is suitable for minors.
 - c. Broadcast media must follow the equal-time rule, which requires a broadcast outlet that gives or sells time to a political candidate to provide that candidate’s opponent the same amount of time at the same cost. Although the rule is still in effect, it is rarely enforced as Americans receive information from many more sources than they did in the mid-twentieth century, when only a small number of networks provided news.
3. The Supreme Court has broadly interpreted the First Amendment’s press and speech protections, upholding the right of news outlets to publish political information and prohibiting prior restraint. (See the required case of *New York Times Co. v. United States* (1971), covered in Chapter 9.)

4. In addition to regulating media content, the FCC historically enacted regulations to prevent the concentration of corporate ownership of media outlets. The concern has been to protect press independence and foster the presence of diverse viewpoints in the information marketplace.
 - a. Beginning in the 1980s, restrictions on corporate ownership of media outlets were relaxed.
 - b. Since that time, the trend has been toward the deregulation of media outlet ownership, and media consolidation has accelerated.
 - c. Most news outlets today are owned by a handful of massive media companies, including Comcast, Time Warner, Disney, Viacom, and News Corp. Each of these has numerous subsidiary labels, making it difficult to recognize the corporate affiliations.
 - d. The consequences of corporate consolidation of media outlets include:
 - content is profit-driven; the presentation of information has a significant marketing function.
 - the important role of the media in setting the policy agenda may be dominated by a small number of powerful corporate leaders with limited interests.
5. The FCC regulates the activities of Internet Service Providers (ISPs), the massive telecommunications companies that sell Internet access to consumers and businesses.
 - a. Net neutrality is the principle that all ISPs must treat information equally and may not discriminate against any content provider, typically done by throttling, or slowing down, specific information streams. The idea is to create an Internet playing field on which the same rules apply equally to all content providers and prohibit powerful telecom companies from effectively censoring information from some sources, thereby controlling access to information by consumers.
 - b. The net neutrality rule is a subject of controversy.

II. THE MEDIA IN MODERN POLITICS

A. ROLES OF THE MEDIA

1. Over the course of U.S. history, the news media has evolved from simple reporting of political speeches and developments to investigative journalism in which reporters serve as watchdogs, scrutinizing and exposing the motives and activities of politicians and powerful organizations.
 - a. The earliest investigative journalists were the muckrakers, who exposed corruption in politics and spotlighted corporate greed and human rights.
 - b. Scrutinizing government activities on behalf of the citizenry is an important function of the press.
 - c. The exposure of corruption associated with investigative journalism, however, has resulted in the disillusionment of voters and an increasingly negative view of politics and politicians.
 - d. The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) is a 1967 law that requires executive branch federal agencies to provide information about the government that is not already published in the *Federal Register* when requested by journalists, researchers, or the public in the name of an open and transparent government in a democracy.
 - FOIA is an important law for protecting the First Amendment freedom of the press because it forced the government to be more transparent.
 - The act can require the full or partial release of records, although there are some exceptions, including personal privacy, privileged communication, trade secrets, and law enforcement or national security concerns.
 - The law has been amended over the years to address changes in technology.
2. Another important function of the media is its role in agenda-setting. The media serves as a gatekeeper, selecting which issues and stories become part of the public perception. Those issues that the media covers frequently and prominently are perceived as being the most significant by voters.

3. Related to agenda-setting is framing. In general, media promotes the news that journalists believe should concern Americans. Additionally, however, its presentations structure how consumers view issues and promotes particular ideas about what questions should be asked. For example, are groups of immigrants approaching the U.S. border with Mexico roving bands of dangerous criminals seeking to enter the United States illegally? Or are they desperate refugees seeking asylum? Different media outlets frame issues differently to appeal to or influence viewers.
4. So, how do media outlets make coverage choices? The American press is independent and primarily for-profit. A profit-driven media implements various strategies for gaining consumers' attention, many of which are problematic.
 - a. Some outlets attract market share by maintaining high standards of journalistic integrity.
 - b. Media outlets may attract market share by catering to the belief system of certain consumers.
 - This bias, or ideological tendency to view and present information from a particular political point of view, may be more or less pronounced.
 - Some outlets incorporate a subtle bias, while others may be obviously or extremely biased.
 - Bias may reflect the ideology or business interests of a corporation's leadership, as well as a marketing strategy.
 - c. During election years, media outlets frequently engage in horse race journalism. This form of reporting entails reporting poll results tracking voter preferences in upcoming elections.
 - The focus by media on polls attracts larger audiences by focusing on the competitive aspect of the race, making political news more exciting.
 - An important criticism of horse race journalism is that it lacks substance. The media focuses on polling to the exclusion of substantive policy issues and differences between candidates, failing in its duty to educate the public.
5. In recent decades, massive growth of technology infrastructure and the media culture has led to the proliferation of fake news or information that lacks credibility.
 - a. Fake news may be understood as a type of propaganda intended to spread false information or cast doubt on legitimate journalism.

- b. Fake news may be difficult for even sophisticated viewers to detect. For example, YouTube videos that appear to be clips from legitimate news sources have been seamlessly edited in a sophisticated manner to be misleading or divisive.
- c. Individual citizens may lack the sophistication to distinguish reliable, unbiased news sources from unreliable or biased news, causing many to distrust and tune out the news media.
- d. Fake news may promote negative attitudes toward both the media and government, decreasing voter turnout and political participation generally.
- e. Characterizing news stories as fake news may cause confusion about the reliability of media outlets and erode trust in journalism.
 - Utilizing nonpartisan online fact checkers such as Snopes, Washington Post Fact Checker, PolitiFact, and FactCheck.org is also helpful in identifying reliable information.

Evaluating the Credibility of Information

Question to Ask	If It's real:	If It's fake:
Evaluate the publisher or news outlet.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – respected news outlet – named author – websites should end in .com or another legitimate domain extension 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – not a known or respected outlet – author is not named or not reliable – websites end in unusual domain extensions
Question the source.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – claims are supported with citations and/or reliable sources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – claims are not supported
Evaluate the quality of the writing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – does not contain grammatical errors – date is current 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – may contain grammatical errors – may be out of date
Verify the information.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – other legitimate outlets have also reported the information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – no respected outlets are reporting the same information
Evaluate the presentation and emotional appeal.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – style, tone, and image choices are appropriate and not sensationalized 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – sensational style, tone, and/or image choices

B. SOCIAL MEDIA

1. One of the most significant developments in twenty-first-century democracy has been the proliferation of social media platforms.
2. Social media allows communication in both directions between political figures and citizens. Politicians can speak directly to constituents, and voters can communicate feedback to politicians.
3. The explosion of social media has drastically altered the role of the mass media as an intermediary, or filter, between politicians and the public. While the role of the traditional media is still important in questioning and eliciting information from politicians, it is no longer necessary as a medium of communication.
4. Social media also provides a platform for citizen journalism.
 - a. Citizen journalists are private citizens who collect, report, and analyze news and political events.
 - b. Reporting on social media may not be as well-resourced or have the same responsibility as professional journalism.
 - c. Social media and citizen journalism increase diversity and choice in news sources.
 - d. Increasing media choices may contribute to political polarization as more options allow consumers to choose news sources that reinforce their existing views.
5. Social media platforms may be effectively used by various political actors to spread misinformation and influence public opinion and elections.

C. MEDIA CHOICE AND ECHO CHAMBERS

1. The proliferation of news sources in the twenty-first century would intuitively seem likely to produce a more informed public. This does not, however, appear to be the case.
2. Media outlets are profit-driven; readership and viewership determine advertising revenue, which drives content.
3. Increasing numbers of easily accessible information sources go hand in hand with increasing choices for consumers.
4. Increasing competition has promoted new, more ideological models of journalism in order to attract audiences and sell advertising.

5. Rather than creating broader exposure to a variety of news sources, consumers choose content that appeals to their worldviews.
6. Social media exacerbates this phenomenon by incentivizing users to create and share biased content within social groups, creating bubbles or echo chambers rarely penetrated by extraneous information. The vast majority of content encountered by Internet users is largely in line with and reinforces their existing beliefs.
7. The Internet thus creates a kind of insularity, as opposed to exposure.