

## **Government in America**

### **CHAPTER 7 OVERVIEW AND OUTLINE**

#### **CHAPTER OVERVIEW**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

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

#### **THE MASS MEDIA TODAY**

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

The Reagan White House operated on the following seven principles:

- 1) plan ahead
- 2) stay on the offensive
- 3) control the flow of information
- 4) limit reporters' access to the president
- 5) talk about the issues you want to talk about
- 6) speak in one voice
- 7) repeat the same message many times

#### **THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MASS MEDIA**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

With the increase in cable channels and Internet usage, a recent trend has been the increase in "broadcast" channels that are oriented toward particularly narrow audiences, often referred to as **narrowcasting**. With so many readily available sources of information for so many specific interests, it will also be extremely easy for those who are not very interested in politics to completely avoid news and public affairs. The result could well be a growing inequality of political information, with the politically interested becoming more knowledgeable while the rest of the public slips further into political apathy. Only a relatively small number of TV stations are publicly owned in America, and these PBS stations play a minimal role in the news business, attracting low ratings. In contrast, in many other countries major TV networks are owned by the government.

## REPORTING THE NEWS

Newspapers consolidated into **chains** during the early part of the twentieth century. Today's massive media conglomerates control newspapers with 78 percent of the nation's daily circulation. These chains often control television and radio stations as well.

News reporting is a *business* in America in which *profits shape how journalists define what is newsworthy, where they get their information, and how they present it*. To a large extent, TV networks define *news* as what is entertaining to the average viewer.

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

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

Strangely enough, as technology has enabled the media to pass along information with greater speed, news coverage has become less thorough. Newspapers once routinely reprinted the entire text of important political speeches; now the *New York Times* is virtually the only paper that does so – and even the *Times* has cut back sharply on this practice. In place of speeches, Americans now hear sound bites of 15 seconds or less on TV.

The charge that the media have a *liberal bias* has become a familiar one in American politics, and there is some limited evidence to support it. Reporters are more likely to call themselves liberal than the general public, and more journalists identify themselves as

Democrats than Republicans. However, there is little reason to believe that journalists' personal attitudes sway their reporting of the news. Most stories are presented in a "point/counterpoint" format in which two opposing points of view are presented.

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

## **THE NEWS AND PUBLIC OPINION**

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

## **THE MEDIA'S AGENDA-SETTING FUNCTION**

As was explained in Chapter 1, people are trying to influence the government's **policy agenda** when they confront government officials with problems they expect them to solve. Interest groups, political parties, politicians, public relations firms, and bureaucratic agencies are all pushing for their priorities to take precedence over others. *Political activists* (often called **policy entrepreneurs**—people who invest their political "capital" in an issue) depend heavily upon the *media* to get their ideas placed high on the governmental agenda. The *staging of political events to attract media attention* is a political art form. Important political events are orchestrated minute by minute with an eye on American TV audiences. Moreover, it is not only the elites who have successfully used the media. Civil rights groups in the 1960s relied heavily on the media to tell their stories of unjust treatment. Many believe that the introduction of television helped to accelerate the movement by graphically showing Americans (in both the North and South) what the situation was.

## **UNDERSTANDING THE MASS MEDIA**

The media act as *key linkage institutions* between the people and the policymakers and have a profound impact on the political policy agenda. The watchdog function of the media *helps to keep government small*. Many observers feel that the press is *biased against whoever holds office* and that reporters want to expose them in the media. With

every new proposal being met with skepticism, regular constraints are placed on the growth of government. Conversely, when they focus on injustice in society, the media inevitably *encourage the growth of government*. The media *portray government as responsible for handling* almost every major problem.

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

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

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

### I. THE MASS MEDIA TODAY

A. The American political system has entered a new period of **high-tech politics** in which the behavior of citizens and policymakers, as well as the political agenda itself, is increasingly shaped by technology.

B. The **mass media** are a key part of that technology. Television, radio, newspapers, magazines, and other means of popular communication are called mass media because they reach out and profoundly influence not only the elites but the masses.

C. Modern political success depends upon control of the mass media.

1. Candidates have learned that one way to *guide the media's focus* is to limit what they report on to carefully *scripted events*. These events are known as **media events**, that is, events that are staged primarily for the purpose of being covered.

2. Image making does not stop with the campaign. It is also a critical element in day-to-day governing since politicians' images in the press are seen as good indicators of their clout. For example, the Reagan administration was particularly effective in controlling the president's image as presented by the media. A large part of today's so-called *30-second presidency* (a reference to 30-second sound bites on TV) is the slickly produced TV commercial.

### II. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MASS MEDIA

A. The daily newspaper is largely a product of the late nineteenth century, while radio and television have been around only since the first half of the twentieth.

B. As recently as the presidency of Herbert Hoover (1929-1933), reporters submitted their questions to the president in writing, and he responded in writing (if at all).

C. Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933-1945) was the first president to use the media effectively. To Roosevelt, the media were a potential ally, and he promised reporters two **press conferences** (presidential meetings with reporters) a week.

D. At the time of Roosevelt's administration, the press had not yet started to report on a political leader's private life: the press *never even reported to the American public that the president was confined to a wheelchair*.

1. The events of the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal soured the press on government. Today's newsmen work in an environment of cynicism; the press sees *ferreting out the truth* as their job since they believe that politicians rarely tell the whole story.

2. **Investigative journalism**—the use of detective-like reporting methods to unearth scandals—pits reporters against political leaders. There is evidence that TV's fondness for investigative journalism has contributed to greater public cynicism and negativism about politics.

E. The **print media**.

1. Newspapers

a. The first American daily newspaper was printed in Philadelphia in 1783, but daily newspapers did not become common until the technological advances of the mid-nineteenth century. Rapid printing and cheap paper made the "*penny press*" possible—a paper that could be bought for a penny and read at home.

b. By the 1840s, the telegraph permitted a primitive "*wire service*," which relayed news stories from city to city faster than ever before. The Associated Press, founded in 1849, depended heavily on this new technology.

c. Two newspaper magnates, Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst, enlivened journalism around the turn of the century. This was the era of yellow journalism, where the main topics were sensationalized accounts of violence, corruption, wars, and gossip.

d. Newspapers consolidated into **chains** during the early part of the twentieth century. Today's massive media conglomerates control newspapers with 78 percent of the nation's daily circulation; these chains often control television and radio stations as well.

e. Among the most influential newspapers today are the *New York Times* (a cut above most newspapers in its influence and impact almost from the beginning), the *Washington Post* (perhaps the best coverage inside Washington), and papers from a few major cities (the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and others). For most newspapers in medium-sized and small towns, the main source of national and world news is the Associated Press wire service.

2. Magazines.

- a. The political content of leading magazines is pretty slim. Newsweeklies such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report* rank well behind popular favorites such as *Reader's Digest*, *TV Guide*, and *National Geographic*.
- b. Serious magazines of political news and opinion (such as the *New Republic*, the *National Review*, and *Commentary*) are primarily read by the educated elite.

F. The **broadcast media**.

- 1. The broadcast media have gradually displaced the print media as Americans' principal source of news and information.
  - a. Radio was invented in 1903; the first modern commercial radio station was Pittsburgh's KDKA, whose first broadcast was of the 1920 Harding-Cox presidential election returns.
  - b. As a form of technology, television is almost as old as radio; the first television station appeared in 1931.
- 2. The 1950s and 1960s were the adolescent years for American television.
  - a. The first televised presidential debate was the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon debate. The poll results from this debate illustrate the visual power of television in American politics: whereas people listening to the radio gave the edge to Nixon, those who saw it on television thought Kennedy won.
  - b. Television took the nation to the war in Vietnam during the 1960s, and TV exposed governmental naïveté (some said it was outright lying) about the progress of the war. President Johnson soon had two wars on his hands, one in Vietnam and the other at home with antiwar protesters—both covered in detail by the media.
- 3. With the growth of *cable TV*, particularly the Cable News Network (CNN), television has entered a new era of bringing news to people (and to political leaders) *as it happens*.
- 4. Since 1963, surveys have consistently shown that more people rely on TV for the news than any other medium; and by a regular two-to-one margin, people think television reports are more believable than newspaper stories.
- 5. Another trend associated with the growth of cable TV and the Internet is the development of **narrowcasting**, where "broadcast" stations target particularly narrow audiences.

### III. REPORTING THE NEWS

A. Defining news.

- 1. News reporting is a *business* in America in which *profits shape how journalists define what is newsworthy, where they get their information, and how they present it*.
- 2. Edward J. Epstein found that to a large extent, TV networks define *news* as what is entertaining to the average viewer.

B. Finding the news.

1. A surprising amount of news comes from *well-established sources*. Most news organizations assign their best reporters to particular **beats**—specific locations where news frequently emanates from, such as Congress.

a. Numerous studies of both the electronic and print media have found that journalists rely almost exclusively on such established sources to get their information.

b. Those who make the news depend on the media to spread certain information and ideas to the general public (sometimes via stories fed to reporters in the form of **trial balloons**—information leaked to see what the political reaction will be).

c. In turn, reporters rely on public officials to keep them informed. Official sources who have the information (such as knowledge about movements during the Gulf War) usually have the upper hand over those who merely report it.

d. Very little of the news is generated by spontaneous events or a reporter's own analysis. Most stories are drawn from situations over which *newsmakers have substantial control*.

2. Despite this dependence on familiar sources, reporters occasionally have an opportunity to live up to the image of the "crusading truthseeker."

a. Local reporters Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward of the *Washington Post* uncovered important evidence in the Watergate case.

b. Columnists like Jack Anderson regularly expose government corruption and inefficiency.

3. The Watergate scandal signaled *a new era in the relationship between journalists and politicians*. Journalists began to assume that politicians had something to hide, and politicians assumed that reporters were out to embarrass them.

#### C. Presenting the news.

1. Once the news has been "found," it has to be compressed into a 30-second news segment or fit in among the advertisements in a newspaper.

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

3. Paradoxically, as technology has enabled the media to pass along information with greater speed, news coverage has become less complete. Americans now hear **sound bites** of fifteen seconds or less on TV.

#### D. Bias in the news.

1. The charge that the media have a *liberal bias* has become a familiar one in American politics, and there is some limited evidence to support it.

a. Reporters are more likely to call themselves liberal than the general public, and a 1992 survey of 1,400 journalists found that

- 44 percent identified themselves as Democrats compared to 16 percent who said they were Republicans.
- b. However, there is little reason to believe that journalists' personal attitudes sway their reporting of the news. Most stories are presented in a "point/counterpoint" format in which two opposing points of view are presented.
2. The news is typically characterized by political neutrality.
    - a. Most reporters strongly believe in journalistic objectivity.
    - b. Those who are best at objective reporting are usually rewarded by their editors.
    - c. Media outlets have a direct financial stake in attracting viewers and subscribers.
  3. A conclusion that news reporting contains little explicit *partisan or ideological* bias is *not* to argue that it does not *distort reality* in its coverage.
    - a. Ideally, the news should mirror reality. In practice, there are too many potential stories for this to be the case.
    - b. Journalists must select which stories to cover and to what degree. Due to economic pressures, the media are biased in favor of stories with high drama that will attract people's interest (rather than extended analyses of complex issues).
    - c. Television is particularly biased toward stories that generate good pictures; seeing a **talking head** (a shot of a person's face talking directly to the camera) is boring, and viewers will switch channels in search of more interesting visual stimulation.

#### IV. THE NEWS AND PUBLIC OPINION

- A. It is difficult to study the effects of the news media on people's opinions and behavior. One reason is that it is hard to separate the media from other influences. In addition, the effect of one news story on public opinion may be negligible, while the cumulative effect of dozens of news stories may be quite important.
- B. There is evidence that the news and its presentation are important in shaping public opinion about political issues.
  1. The decision to cover or to ignore certain issues can affect public opinion.
  2. By focusing public attention on specific problems, the media influence the criteria by which the public evaluates political leaders.
  3. There is also some evidence that people's opinions shift with the tone of the news coverage. Popular presidents prompt the public to support policies, but the most powerful influence is that of news commentators on public opinion change.
- C. Much remains unknown about the effects of the media and the news on American political behavior. Enough is known, however, to conclude that the media are a *key political institution*.

#### V. THE MEDIA'S AGENDA-SETTING FUNCTION

A. As was explained in Chapter 1, people are trying to influence the government's **policy agenda** when they confront government officials with problems they expect them to solve.

1. Interest groups, political parties, politicians (including the president and Congress), public relations firms, and bureaucratic agencies are all pushing for their priorities to take precedence over others.

2. *Political activists* (often called **policy entrepreneurs**—people who invest their political "capital" in an issue) depend heavily upon the *media* to get their ideas placed high on the governmental agenda.

a. Policy entrepreneurs' weapons include press releases, press conferences, letter writing, buttonholing reporters and columnists, and trading personal contacts.

b. People in power can also use a **leak**, a carefully placed bit of inside information that is given to a friendly reporter.

B. The *staging of political events to attract media attention* is a political art form.

1. Important political events (such as Nixon's famous trip to China) are orchestrated minute by minute with an eye on American TV audiences.

2. It is not only the elites who have successfully used the media. Civil rights groups in the 1960s relied heavily on the media to tell their stories of unjust treatment. Many believe that the introduction of television helped to accelerate the movement by graphically showing Americans (in both the North and South) what the situation was.

3. Conveying a *long-term, positive image* via the media is *more important than a few dramatic events*. Policy entrepreneurs depend on goodwill and good images. Public relations firms may be hired to improve a group's (or individual's) image and their ability to sell their policy positions.

## VI. UNDERSTANDING THE MASS MEDIA

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

1. The **watchdog function** of the media *helps to keep government small*.

a. Many observers feel that the press is *biased against whoever holds office* and that reporters want to expose them in the media. With every new proposal being met with skepticism, regular constraints are placed on the growth of government.

b. The watchdog orientation of the press can be characterized as *neither liberal nor conservative, but reformist*.

2. When they focus on injustice in society, the media inevitably *encourage the growth of government*.

a. Once the media identify a problem in society, reporters usually begin to ask what the government is doing about the problem.

b. The media *portray government as responsible for handling almost every major problem*.

C. Individualism and the media.

1. The rise of television has furthered individualism in the American political process.
  - a. Candidates are now much more capable of running for office on their own by appealing to people directly through television.
  - b. Congress is difficult to cover on television because there are 535 members, but there is only one president, so the presidency has increasingly received more exposure vis-à-vis the Congress.

D. Democracy and the media.

1. The rise of the "information society" has not brought about the rise of the "informed society."
  - a. The media do a much better job of covering the "horse race" aspects of politics than of covering substantive issues.
  - b. With the media's superficial treatment of important policy issues, it is not surprising that the incredible amount of information available to Americans today has not visibly increased their political awareness or participation.
2. The media's defense is to say that this is what the people want. Network executives claim that they are in business to make a profit, and to do so they have to appeal to the maximum number of people.