

# 9

## The Media

IN THIS CHAPTER YOU WILL LEARN:

- ◆ How the media is changing.
- ◆ The democratic promises and pitfalls of new social media.
- ◆ How the media is (and is not) biased.
- ◆ The rules that channel print and broadcast into their current forms.
- ◆ Why the media in America is different from media in other countries.
- ◆ How the media affects the ways we think and talk about politics.
- ◆ The influence of the media on campaigns and elections.



## IN 1961, THE AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

enlisted Ronald Reagan, then an actor, to help fight President John F. Kennedy's health care plan. Reagan cut a record (on vinyl) that the medical association sent (by snail mail) to every physician's home. "If this program passes," warned Reagan, "one day we will awake to find that we have socialism. . . . We will spend our sunset years telling our children and our children's children what it was like in America when men were free." The record, dubbed "Operation Coffee Cup," asked doctors' wives to invite their friends, serve coffee, play Reagan's message, and then write letters to Congress opposing government health insurance. Congress turned down the program, although another version passed four years later and is now known as Medicare.

In 1993, the Health Insurance Association of America aired television ads opposing President Bill Clinton's health plan. The ads featured "Harry and Louise," a pleasant middle-aged couple, concerned that national health insurance would create a bureaucratic monster and wreck their health care. "They [the Washington bureaucrats] choose," intones a voice at the end of the ad. "You lose." The national media reran the ads on television, described them in newspapers, and discussed them on radio. Congress soon buried the Clinton health proposal.

In 2009, Sarah Palin posted a Facebook entry attacking President Barack Obama's health care plan, then being debated in Congress. "The America I know and love is not one in which my parents or my baby with Down Syndrome will have to stand in front of Obama's 'death panel' so his bureaucrats can decide . . . whether they are worthy of health care. Such a system is downright evil." Palin's reference to "death panels" went viral. Talking heads, bloggers, tweeters, radio jocks, editorial writers, members of Congress, and citizens all repeated the phrase. Democrats mocked Palin, denied the allegation, and tinkered with their plan, but there was no quelling the storm. Although health reform eventually won, the Palin post helped galvanize opponents who kept right on fighting to repeal the law. In June, 2012, the Supreme Court upheld the law but the battle still rages.\*

Each snapshot captures the media technology of a different era—and the politics they have channeled. In 1961, a recording reached an elite audience, which responded by mailing letters to Congress. In 1993, a TV ad ran in select markets and then spread via talking television heads. In 2009, a posting instantly reached millions of Facebook friends and followers, generating reaction in both new formats (blogs, tweets, and texts) and traditional ones (newspapers,

*see for yourself 9.1*



Go online to hear Reagan's "Operation Coffee Cup" recording.

*see for yourself 9.2*



Go online to see the Harry and Louise ad.

\*To be updated for publication based on November 2012 election results.

radio, TV). Three major changes mark the evolution of issue campaigns across the fifty years:

- First, *the media keeps delivering information faster and faster.*
- Second, *today's media includes many more voices and formats.*
- Third, *the new media permits the public to be much more active.* You can comment on a Facebook posting more easily (and in more ways) than you could respond to a record in 1961 or a TV commercial in 1993.

What is the media? It is all the ways people get information about politics and the wider world: television, radio, newspapers, Internet searches, blogs, Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and more. It is the major information connection between citizens and government. Ronald Reagan or Sarah Palin needed the media to talk to the people and, today, the people use the media to talk back.

Every change in the media affects politics. The rise of radio, television, and the Internet each had a profound impact on American politics. Today, the media is changing very rapidly. Fifty years ago, everyone heard the same newscast and took part in the same debate. Today, each position on the political spectrum tunes into its own news source and communicates with its own network. A key question looms above the rising new media: Does it enhance democracy? Diminish it? Or perhaps it does some of both?

**Who are we?** From the very start of this book, we have seen that the United States is an immense, ongoing argument over political ideas. The media is what brings the people into the debates; it is the great link between leaders and citizens. The national media reflects America itself: raucous, fast-changing, multilingual, multicultural, forceful, rich, loud, and lucrative. It broadcasts in many languages at home. It broadcasts America to the world.

## American Media Today: Traditional Formats Are Declining

Media technology changes quickly and each change remakes the connections between citizens and their leaders. The media affects the news we get, the arguments we hear and the deliberations we engage in.

### Where People Go for News

Our lead story is simple. Fifty years ago, three national networks and the daily paper delivered essentially the same news to a largely passive audience. News broadcasts ran once each evening, for a half-hour; two networks (later, three)

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\*Yes, *media* is the plural of *medium*—usually defined as *the way we convey something*. But by now Americans routinely use this plural as a single noun, and we give you permission to break the rules of grammar.

## 64 BY THE NUMBERS

### *The Media*

Number of daily newspapers in print in the United States in 1850: **254**

Number in 1900: **2,226**

Approximate number today: **1,400**

Expected number in 2020 according to the Congressional Research Service: **700**

Estimated number of African American owned newspapers: **200**

Number of black owned newspapers that still print daily editions: **0**

Percentage of Republicans and Democrats who called the media “biased” in 1989: **25%**

Percentage of Republicans who say so in 2012: **49%**

Percentage of Democrats who say so in 2012: **32%**

Number of television channels received by the average home today: **118.6**

Number of households reached by NBC: **112,770,700**

Number reached by the largest Spanish network: **57,950,000**

Number reached by the largest Christian network: **68,940,000**

Rank of Walt Disney, Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation, and Time Warner among all the media companies of the world: **1, 2, 3**

Percent of African American, Hispanic, and whites who report being active on social network sites according to a Pew Study on the media: **71% 72%, 58%**

Percent of each who report blogging: **22%, 13%, 14%**

Percentage of 18- to 29-year-olds who use the Internet as their major news source: **65**

Percentage of those over 65 who do **14**



● Television news has gone from an authoritative voice (Walter Cronkite) to a great range of shows each speaking from a different perspective—here, Rachel Maddow on the set of her show.

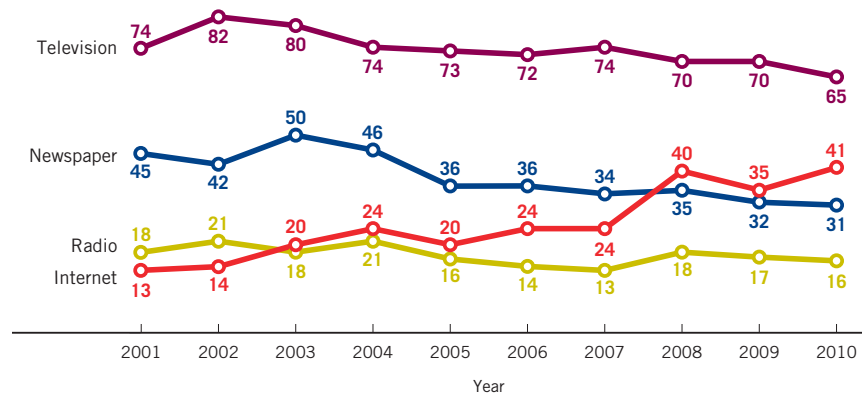
dominated the news, and there were very few differences between their shows. Most households subscribed to one paper that arrived either in the morning or in the evening. Your grandparents' choices were simple: to tune in or not. Today, new technologies give Americans a host of options that are shaking up the way both the media and the government conducts business. This story—rapid media change with major consequences for politics and democracy—is nothing new. It has marked media advances throughout American history. Figure 9.1 summarizes where people have been going for their news over the last 10 years.

As you can see, television remains the top source of news for most Americans. However, the audience is declining; TV was the chief source of news for 82 percent of the public in 2002 and fell to 66 percent by the end of the decade. Newspapers are crashing; they've lost a third of their readers in the past decade—as well as many of their advertisers. Radio hangs on; almost everyone listens (especially in the car), and a faithful few consider it their major source of news.

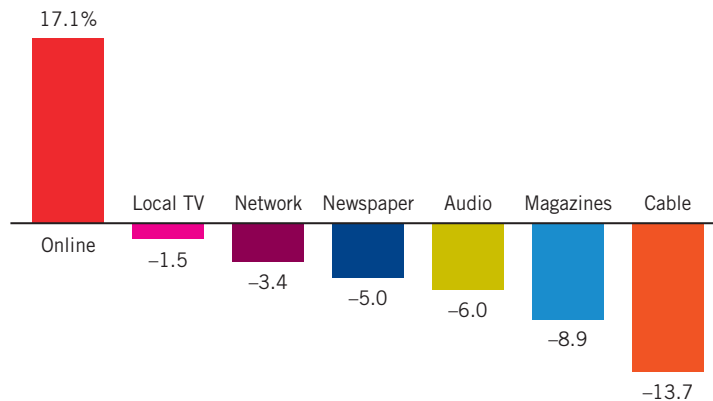
The biggest change is the rise of the Internet, which seizes more of the media pie every year. New online technologies complicate the picture. Almost half the public (47 percent) gets some news through the phone or another mobile device. We can get a better handle on the change by looking at a single year (Figure 9.2). As you can see, when it comes to delivering the news, every technology is losing ground to the Internet.

The velocity of change is even greater when we focus on different segments of the American audience. The Internet is already the main source of news among adults under 30, rising past television in 2010. As Figure 9.3 shows, 65 percent of

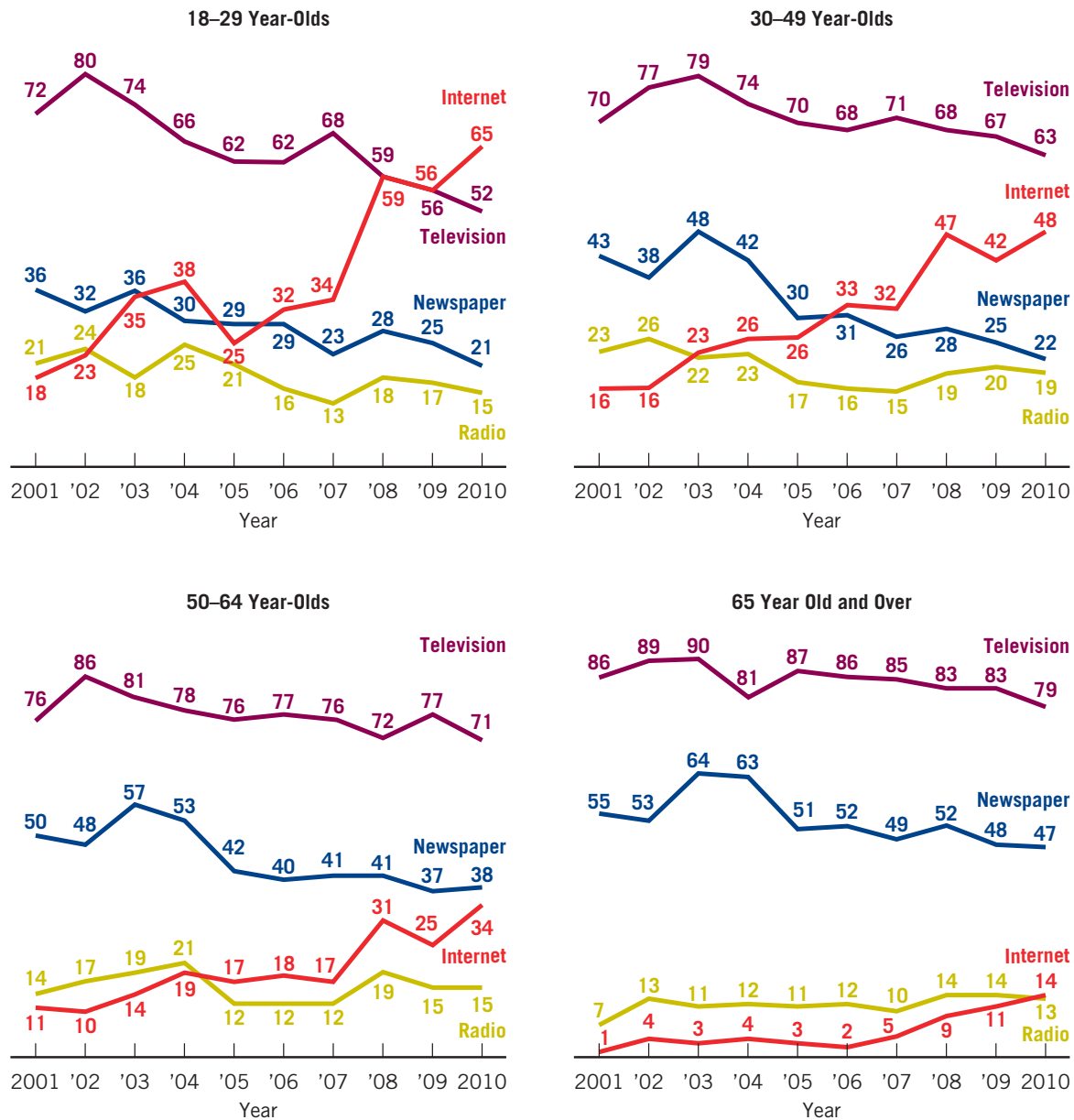
● **Figure 9.1** *Reliable sources.*  
The percentage of Americans who get most of their national and international news from each medium. Source: Pew Research Center



**Audiences Turn to Web**  
Percentage Change in Audience, 2009–2010



● **Figure 9.2** *Audiences turn to the Web.* Source: Pew Research Center.



● **Figure 9.3** Main news source, by age. Source: Pew Research Center, December 1–5, 2010. Figures add to more than 100% because respondents could volunteer up to two main sources.

young adults (18–29 years old) consider the Net their main news source. They were allowed to name up to two primary news sources, but only 52 percent chose television. In contrast, not many people over 65 (just 13 percent) go online for their news. The media’s future rests in the hands (or on the thumbs) of the young—and the young are on line.

What do these changes mean for the media, for politics, and for democracy? We can learn more by focusing on the developments in each of the major media.

### Newspaper Decline

Newspapers have always been midwives to American democracy. *The Federalist* (still the most important commentaries on our Constitution) first appeared as newspaper articles in *The New York Independent Journal*. George Washington subscribed to

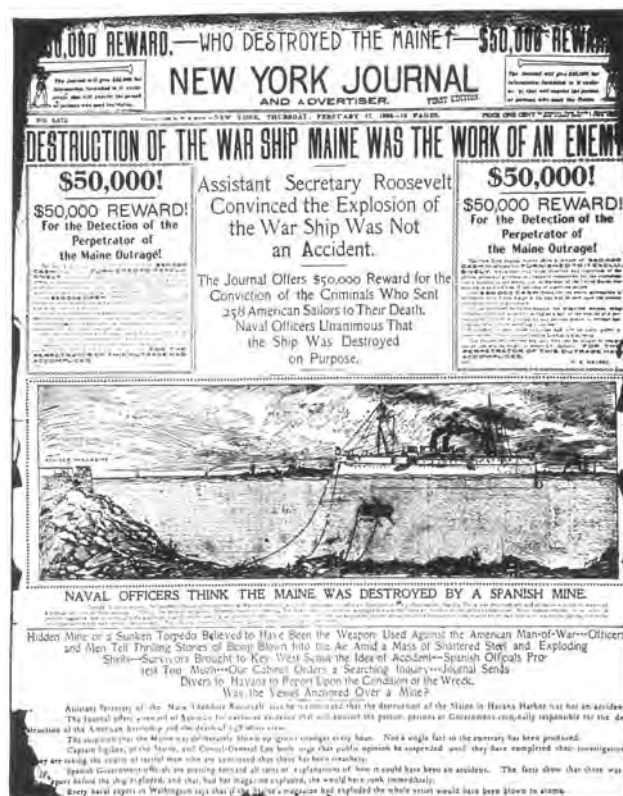
ten newspapers. His most famous communication, the Farewell Address, was actually a letter addressed to his “fellow citizens” and printed in the papers.

**Mass media:** Media for broad popular audiences—including newspapers, radio, television.

**The First Mass Media.** In the 1830s, new printing technology cut the price of a paper from a dime to a penny. Newspapers quickly grew into the first **mass media**, just when the vote expanded to include all white men. (The definition of mass media is simple: media for the masses.) The penny papers reflected the raucous and often corrupt politics of the era. The *New York Herald* broke with the stodgy past, hired reporters to go out and dig up facts, and gave the readers just what they wanted—murder, fire, suicide, and crime. That disgusted the old elites but made the *Herald* the most widely read newspaper in the world. One New York rival, the *Tribune*, could boast Karl Marx as a foreign correspondent. Another, the *Aurora*, hired a former schoolteacher named Walt Whitman, already the foremost poet in New York.

The influence of newspapers in American politics and society grew for almost a century. The Spanish-American War, in 1898, is known as the first media war. Screaming headlines blamed Spain for sinking an American battleship in Havana Harbor (there was no evidence they did) and helped bully the McKinley administration into the conflict. Confronted with large numbers of immigrants who did not speak English well, the papers developed comic strips to stretch their markets to newcomers. By the turn of the century there were more than 2,200 papers in the United States.

**The Rise and Fall of the Newspaper Business.** Local advertisers used the papers to reach their customers and generally gravitated to the newspaper with the largest circulation. As a result, most towns and cities had only one newspaper by



● *The power of the media, 1898. No one was sure exactly why the American battleship exploded. An industrial accident remains likely. But the newspapers left no doubt that it was “Spanish treachery” and with screaming headlines pushed a reluctant McKinley administration into war with Spain.*

the mid 20th century. The papers charged both the advertisers and the readers—almost every newspaper in the country made money.

Even after the rise of radio and television, newspapers remained the major source for gathering and disseminating news, especially local news. A typical metropolitan paper ran seventy stories in a day—including national, local, and business news; add sports and society and the total ran to more than a hundred. By contrast, the half-hour television news had time for only ten or twelve stories.

To cover and produce all those stories, city papers had large news staffs. Well into the 1990s, the *Dallas Morning News*, for example, had more reporters than all three of the city's leading network affiliates combined. Television news, both local and national, generally followed the newspapers' lead in deciding what stories to cover.<sup>1</sup>

Now, after more than two centuries at the center of the news media, the newspaper era is ending. The traditional business model has failed. The advertisers who guaranteed profits have migrated to the web; so have the readers. By 2010, more people read their news online than in print—and most of them read it for free. One study of thirty-eight newspapers discovered that, on average, for every dollar newspapers gained in digital formats they were losing seven on print.

Most of the revenue derived from the web is captured by Internet companies; in fact, by mid-2011, Google attracted more online revenue than all the newspapers in the United States combined. A small number of newspapers are making the rocky transition to online subscriptions—notably the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times*—but their margins on line are far smaller than the print editions used to be.

The result is a dramatic decline for big city newspapers. Between 2000 and 2010 American newspapers slashed 30 percent of their staff. Some major papers stopped printing and moved entirely to the web. At least eight of the top twenty U.S. papers have filed for bankruptcy, in cities from Philadelphia to San Jose. Most emerged from bankruptcy and are still operating, but their finances remain shaky.

**Should We Worry?** There is much to celebrate about reading the news online. It is up-to-the-minute and it invites a more active reader. Rather than simply take the editor's package, readers do their own editing. They open a newspaper story, post their own comment, click on a link connecting them to a Huffington Post report, and then surf over to YouTube for a clip posted by a TV channel—or by an eyewitness. The reader, not the editor, chooses the material. The Internet permits the reader to respond, to share, to network, and to learn more.

Media analysts, however, see two major problems with the decline and possible death of newspapers. First, newspapers still do the basic reporting. Web-based outlets add opinions, background, links, and multiple perspectives, but it all begins with stories developed by reporters. If newspapers can't generate revenue, they won't survive. Where will we get the basic facts and stories? Will the reporting function migrate to another media institution?

Second, important stories may get lost. Newspapers always covered the “hot” stories (war, murder and high-school sports) along with less exciting civic issues (such as school board meetings or wetland controversies). Since it was all one package, the popular stories paid for the civics lessons. As newspapers downsize staff and try to sell their stories by the piece on the web, there may be no way to subsidize coverage on limited interest (but very important) issues like education.<sup>2</sup>

## Radio Holds Steady

The first commercial radio stations sprang up in the 1920s. President Franklin Roosevelt seized the new technology during the Great Depression of the 1930s and delivered a weekly radio address, known as the “Fireside Chat.” The talks





● Roosevelt used the new media—radio—to speak directly to citizens in their homes. The results: the rise of the personal presidency. The change in the media helped introduce a change in our politics.

were informal, as if the president were talking to his listeners right by their own firesides. For the first time, the media offered a live connection between elected leaders and the public. Hearing Roosevelt's voice changed the relationship between Americans and their presidents. The people grew to expect a personal link. Indeed, political scientists call this development the rise of the **personal presidency**. The new media technology helped change the presidency itself.

### Personal presidency:

The idea that the president has a personal link to the public. Made possible by 20th century media.

Other politicians also used radio, often in creative ways. During a New York City newspaper strike, Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia read the daily comic strips on the air. The radio gave new immediacy to wartime reports (during World War II) and to baseball games. It accelerated the velocity of news and information. The medium made the nation, and the world, a smaller place.

The radio era lasted just 30 years. By the mid 1950s, television displaced it. However, the radio lingers on, still contributing to politics. One important recent development is conservative talk-radio. This format arose in the late 1980s after the Reagan administration cleared the way (we'll discuss the government connection below). Rush Limbaugh—a talented, loquacious, pugnacious host—syndicated his show, and a stream of other conservatives followed him onto the airwaves. Limbaugh pioneered the argument that became a foundation for conservative talk: the rest of the media is biased, so you have to dial in here. Liberals tried to counter with their own talk shows, but their Air American Network floundered and then shut down, perhaps because liberals are less likely to complain that the media is biased.

The main demographic for talk radio is middle-aged, white, male, and conservative. (Over 45 percent of regular listeners describe themselves as politically conservative, compared to less than 20 percent who call themselves liberal.<sup>3</sup>)

One exception to radio's rightward tilt is National Public Radio (NPR). Its audience, over 27 million listeners a week, is loyal and slowly growing. As news

shows fade from the radio dial, NPR, which reaches 99 percent of the U.S. population, takes up the slack. The listeners are older (45–64), well educated (2.5 times more likely to have a college degree than the general public), and overwhelmingly identify as liberal. Roughly 15 percent of NPR's funds come from the federal government, prompting ferocious criticism from conservatives, who argue that taxpayers should not be supporting radio shows. Supporters respond that rural areas are most reliant on public funds and that they often have no other source of radio news.

Despite its fans and its controversies, radio does not matter much to most Americans. Just over 15 percent of the public calls it their major news source. And when asked what communications technologies make a difference in their life, radio comes in last. Only 22 percent of the public calls it important—behind iPods (27 percent), broadband Internet connections (49 percent), and cell phones (54 percent).<sup>4</sup>

### Television: From News to Infotainment

Television came onto the American scene in the 1950s and revolutionized both entertainment and politics. President John F. Kennedy sensed TV's power and gave the first live press conference in February 1961. An incredible 65 million people—one in three Americans—tuned in. The young, charismatic president was a natural TV performer and, once again, a new media technology intensified the link between the people and their president. Vice President Lyndon Johnson offered an ironic symbol of the new, visual era when he tried to hide his 250 pounds with a girdle.

In September 1963, the CBS evening news show expanded from 15 minutes to a half-hour. Two months later, an assassin killed President Kennedy and stunned the country. For the first time, Americans gathered around their television sets during a crisis. As they watched, during a terrible November weekend, the president's assassin was himself shot dead at point blank range on live TV—a grisly demonstration of the new medium's power.



● Kennedy pioneered another media first—the news conference carried live on television. His approval rating soared to 70%. Presidents now had to be telegenic and quick in live performance. Once again, the media had shifted the expectations and role of the presidency.

**The Rise of Cable.** Two networks, CBS and NBC, monopolized the television news business during the 1960s–1970s. Since news teams were expensive to deploy, most stories originated from Washington, D.C., and a few big cities. The stations did not share footage with local affiliates until after the nightly broadcast, which was solemnly read by celebrated anchors. Interested Americans all watched the same version of the day’s events.

Technology broke the monopoly. Cable stations came online in the 1980s and began to reach for small slices of the network audience. They lingered on the fringe of the media until 1991 when an upstart network, CNN, showed live video of allied rockets, screaming into Baghdad, the capital of Iraq, at the start of the first Gulf War. CNN introduced a new model: It reported news all day. It gathered footage from local stations around the country, which now had the technical capacity to produce their own videos. It shared its footage of breaking news with local stations. No more waiting until 6 PM for the national network news. A new format was born: the 24-hour news cycle. Twenty years ago, the White House staff, and the reporters who covered them, all relaxed when the news cycle ended around 5 PM. Today, the cycle never ends.

In 1996, Rupert Murdoch launched FOX News, a network with a conservative slant. As Republican viewers headed for FOX, other cable networks (most notably MSNBC) moved to the left and developed shows with a liberal spin. Eventually, cable channels filled every niche along the political spectrum—FOX on the right, shows like *Hardball* with Chris Matthews in the center, and the *Rachel Maddow Show* or *The Colbert Report* on the left.

see for yourself 9.3



Go online to see Senator McCain’s announcement (check out bandleader Paul Shafer’s pink shades).

**Infotainment.** Before long, the line between news and entertainment began to evaporate. Late night talk shows got into the political act. Hosts gleefully lacerated the political losers of the day. Politicians responded by lining up to participate. Senator John McCain, the Republican nominee for president in 2008, announced his candidacy on the David Letterman show— with bandleader Paul Shaffer in pink shades blasting out “Hail to the Chief.”



● The line between news and entertainment has blurred. Here, Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert’s *Restore Sanity* rally in Washington, D.C.

The media world turned upside down, as clips of McCain on Letterman played on CBS News. Mitt Romney dutifully trooped over to Letterman for “a top ten things you don’t know about Mitt.”

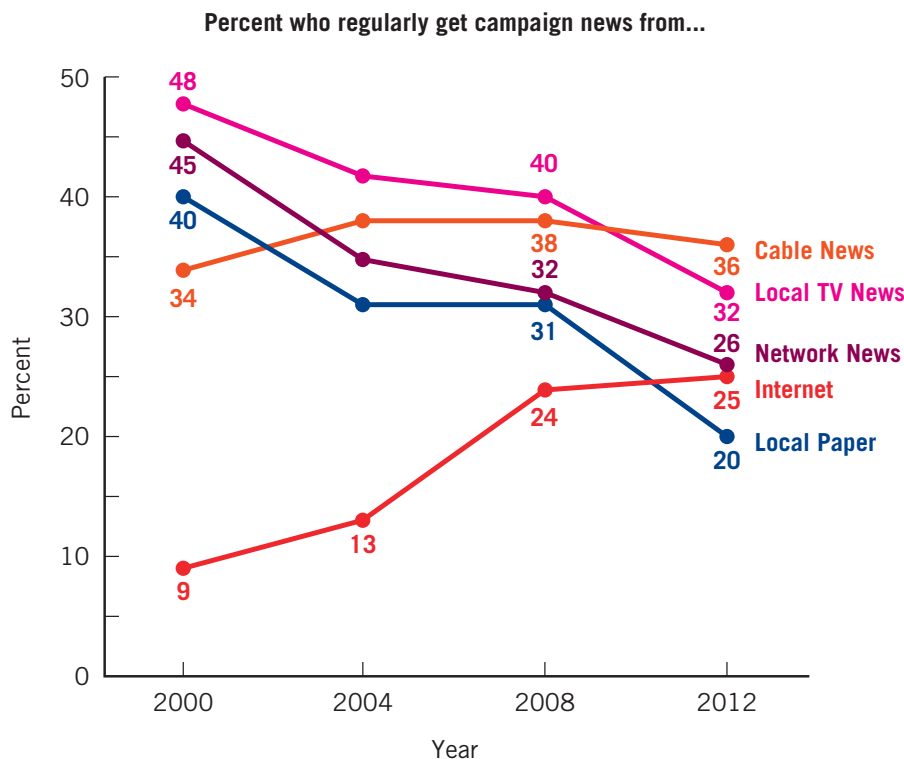
Shows like Letterman mix politics and entertainment. One night the Republican frontrunner announces his candidacy for president. Another night it might be an actor like Megan Fox talking about tattoos and why she dropped out of high school. Jon Stewart refined the formula by merging comedy, entertainment, political talk, and savvy media criticism on *The Daily Show*. Stewart himself pointed out the fading line between news and entertainment when he noted that his show airs on Comedy Central and the lead-in features puppets. When asked about their major source of news in a recent Pew poll, young viewers (18–29 years old) were as likely to tap *The Daily Show* as the network news shows.

The corporate setting helps blur the line between news, politics and entertainment, a phenomenon now described as **infotainment**. The American news media is part of the entertainment industry. Consider the three national broadcast networks: Walt Disney owns ABC while National Amusements, a theater chain that also runs MTV, controls CBS. NBC is part of a conglomerate that includes Wet ‘N Wild—Orlando, Universal Studios, and GM appliances. *Univision*, which broadcasts in Spanish, is the fifth largest network and spans TV, radio, music, and web sites. The institutional connection helps accelerate the trend to infotainment.

Amid this colorful scene, the network news steadily declines. In 2010 alone, the three network nightly news shows lost 752,000 viewers (3.4 percent). Since 1985, the three networks have cut their Washington reporting staff from 110 to 51—more than matching the newspaper cuts, which went from 600 reporters to 300.<sup>5</sup>

Cable news has not replaced the national networks. The lowest ranked network news show (CBS) still draws two and a half times more viewers than the

**Infotainment:** The blurred line between news and entertainment.



● **Figure 9.4** Campaign news sources: the Internet grows in importance, cable TV holds steady, and others decline in popularity as a source of campaign news.

highest ranked cable evening news (FOX). Yet, more people report getting their political news from cable than from the networks. Overall, the TV picture reflects the state of the entire American media. A single, shared view of the world has shattered. TV now runs the gamut from left to right and from formal news to frothy entertainment. The lines between entertainment and news continue to blur.

### Movies: Mirroring America

We usually think of cinema as pure entertainment, but it often engages politics in important ways. Movies hold a mirror to society. They reflect emerging ideas and construct shared images, metaphors, and ways to talk. They mobilize support for emerging ideas—sometimes consciously, sometimes in unexpected ways.

The first modern movie, *The Birth of A Nation* (1915), told the story of the post-Civil War south from the perspective of the Ku Klux Klan, the terrorist organization that fought against civil rights. It was, at the time, powerful propaganda for racial segregation. It led to a revival of the Klan, justified the segregation that had gone into place in the previous twenty years across the South, and helped generate support for the segregation of government offices in Washington, D.C. On a very different note, *To Kill a Mocking Bird* (1962) portrayed an optimistic new South where idealists like lawyer Atticus Finch fought injustice. The good American people, and the wisdom of the law, offered the hope of racial healing. From *Gone with the Wind* (with its romantic portrait of the old South) to *Crash* (with its cynical stew of race and immigration), from Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever* (in which an interracial relationship forces everyone to confront their racism) to *Stand and Deliver* (with its idealized portrait of a gifted teacher in Latino LA), movies wrestle with race, with ethnicity, with who we are. Iconic films, beginning with the *Birth of a Nation*, summarize—and sometimes shape—the national view.

Movies also address national values. War movies can celebrate the righteous nation (as they did in the 1950s) or criticize U.S. imperialism (in the 1970s). Sometimes a film sets off a great debate about just what Americans believe. In 1989, Oliver Stone set out to satirize investment banking in *Wall Street*. In the movie's classic scene, the master manipulator, Gordon Gekko, gives a speech that ends with a ringing endorsement: "Greed is good . . . Greed, you mark my words, will save . . . that malfunctioning corporation called the USA." Soon traditional business-news sources—*Newsweek*, *Forbes*, the *Wall Street Journal*—were all debating the proposition. Is greed a social problem or is it the energy at the heart of our economic system? Twenty years later, *The Social Network* used the story of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg to raise the old question of greed (this time, for status) among a new generation of entrepreneurs.

Films that appear to simply entertain—and even exploit—can reflect cultural currents. In 1971, after the civil rights movement had ended, a series of black films came into vogue. Led by *Shaft* and *Sweet, Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, the films featured all black casts led by tough, arrogant, highly sexualized characters (male and female) operating in a hazy territory between rough justice and crime. The Blaxploitation (a word that combines black and exploitation) genre played to black, urban audiences—with some films crossing over to white audiences—who cheered the cheeky treatment of long taboo subjects. Black critics both applauded and deplored the blaxploitation genre, but the movies marked a new phase—both angry and liberated—in American racial discourse.

see for yourself 9.4



Go online to hear the “greed is good” speech.



● The *Hunger Games* (2012) mixes action with social commentary in its depiction of a totalitarian, dystopian version of a future America.

Similarly, the irreverent campus comedies—beginning, of course, with *Animal House*—stand in a long anti-elitist tradition. In this genre, which includes films like *PCU* and *Legally Blond*, the comedy is organized around a group of losers who stick it to the privileged, arrogant, know-it all elites. The often-crass formula taps the same populist wellsprings as do rebellious political movements like the Tea Party or Occupy Wall Street.

American politics is full of important debates about national identity and values. Films offer a different way to present arguments, project views, and build a collection of shared cultural images. From *Philadelphia* (on homophobia, homosexuality, and AIDS) to *Wag the Dog* (on launching wars to boost presidential popularity) to *Norma Rae* (on union organizing), film can shape the way we talk and think about important issues.

### What Do You Think?

#### 9.1 Movies that Take a Stand

Pick one film and add it to those we've listed. Describe how it takes a stand on some important issue. Is it insightful in its depiction in American politics and culture?

## The Media Today

The United States now features a loud and colorful media scene. At its center, traditional newspapers and networks aim for objective reporting, but the effort is increasingly hard to sell. A great question now dogs the media: who will pay to gather hard news?

Meanwhile, a highly partisan, very noisy collection of cable shows and radio stations fills the airwaves. Given the many outlets spread along the political spectrum, Americans no longer have anything like a common, authoritative source of information. Each show spins the news differently and attracts people who share its perspective. People have choices like never before. And nothing underscores this development more than the rise of the new media.

### THE BOTTOM LINE

- Thirty years ago, a few outlets—three networks, the local newspaper—delivered roughly the same news. Americans had no real choices about what news media to follow. Today, every political perspective—left, right and center—can find media outlets that cater to their perspective. Americans no longer share a single source of news.
- In the past, the rise of each new form of media—newspapers, radio, and television—changed the nature of news reporting—and altered political institutions like the presidency.
- The traditional newspaper model is in serious decline. This poses a challenge because newspaper reporters still research most of the breaking news. Network television, local television, and cable are all losing ground as the place Americans go for news. The new media is taking their place—especially among young people. What will be the political effects of this change?

## The Rise of the New Media

In the spring of 2011, an impoverished street vendor in Tunisia set himself on fire after a government official slapped him and suspended his license. Other people had committed protest suicides with no effect. This time his relatives took to the street “with a rock in one hand and a cell phone in another,” as one of them put it. They posted videos of their protest and the brutal police crackdown on Facebook; Al Jazeera, the Arabic television network, picked up videos and put them on the air. The images turned small protests into massive demonstrations that eventually toppled the government of Tunisia, then spread to Egypt (where another government fell), Bahrain, Yemen, Syria, and Iran. In Libya, a full-scale civil war drew in the United States and European powers. The demonstrators told their stories, organized rallies, and communicated with the world through cell-phone texts as well as Internet sources like Facebook and Twitter. The old regimes had held on to power, in part, by ruthlessly controlling news and information. Now, the new social media burst through the censorship.

What effects will the new social media have in the United States? We have already seen how the Internet is shaking up traditional ways of delivering the news. Past media revolutions, from the penny press to cable television, have changed

the way the American people relate to politics and government. What effects will these latest technologies produce?

Some observers predict a new era of citizen participation. Others take a gloomier view and warn about eroding news coverage, fragmented communities, and viral malice.

### Scenario 1: Rebooting Democracy

First, new media optimists begin by pointing out how *active* Internet users are. Television, radio, and newspapers deliver the news to passive audiences. On the Internet people seek out the news, follow links, and access a world of information. Advocates have a term for the new activism: **Clicktivism**—democracy enhanced through the click of a mouse.

Second, people can easily respond. The web offers multiple opportunities for talking back: Tick the “Like” icon, fire off an irate email, launch a blog, or communicate a network of like-minded people. Democracies, when they’re working well, *hear* their people. The new media gives the people many new ways to be heard.

Third, as we have seen, the new media turns everyone into a potential reporter. Traditional news always awaited the arrival of a camera team. Now anyone can record an event on their phone, post it to Facebook or YouTube and offer it to a media outlet. News that traditional programs would have missed now feed

**Clicktivism:** democracy enhanced through the click of a mouse.



● Markos (Kos) Moulitsas Zunig introduced the very successful blog, *The Daily Kos*



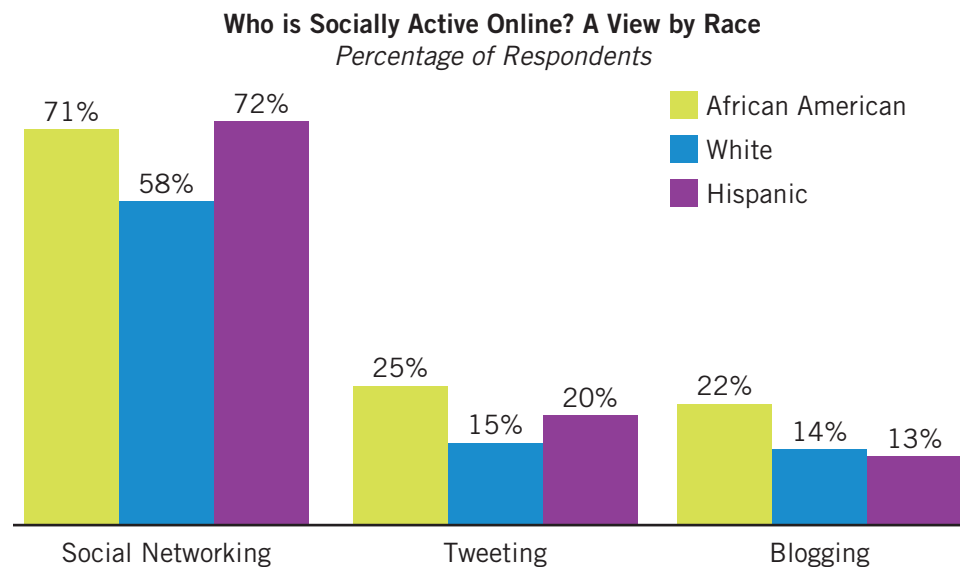
into the media from every corner of the country. The political equilibrium changes when the public actually sees police officers beating a black motorist or a politician casually tossing off a racial slur.

Fourth, the web vastly expands the range of commentary. Traditional media limits punditry to a small circle of well-known personalities and authors. Today anyone with something to say can launch a blog, send a tweet to dozens or hundreds (or millions) of followers, or post opinions on Facebook. Some have had terrific success. *Daily Kos*, launched by Markos (Kos) Moulitsas Zuniga in 2003, boasts 2.5 million visitors per month. Nate Silver’s 2008 election blog, *fivethirtyeight*, became so popular that the *New York Times* made him a regular contributor. Other familiar sites include The Drudge Report (conservative), the Huffington Post (liberal), and Glenn Reynolds’s *Instapundit* (conservative).

Fifth, the web offers new ways for politicians and parties to reach out. Barack Obama refined the technique and turned his 2008 campaign into a kind of movement. By the 2010 midterms, Republicans—and especially Tea Party conservatives—were using the web to launch a movement of their own.

Finally, new media appears to be overcoming its “digital divide.” At first, minorities and poor people appeared to have considerably less access and less savvy. Today, the online demographics are changing. African Americans have caught up to whites on Facebook and are now more likely to tweet and blog. Latinos still lag behind, but the gap is closing. A recent study of 12-year-olds found that the most intense users of the Internet in the United States were African American females.<sup>6</sup>

In sum, advocates claim, the Internet is active, it links people to one another, it spreads the news collected by ordinary people, it permits citizens to join the talking heads and make their own comments, and it offers politicians a powerful tool to



**Note:** Blogging data from Jan. 2010, social networking and Twitter data from May 2010.

**Question:** Q1: Do you create or work on your own online journal or blog? Q2: Have you ever used online social or professional networks? Q3: Do you ever use Twitter or another service to share updates about yourself or to see updates about others?

● **Figure 9.5** Who is socially active online? A view by race. Source: *Usage Over Time and 8% of Online Americans Use Twitter*, Pew Internet & American Life Project. *Pew Research Center's Projects for Excellence in Journalism, 2011 State of the New Media*.

mobilize, connect, and collect. None of these factors insures that the new media will help refresh American democracy. But they suggest a great deal of promise.

## Scenario 2: More Hype and Danger than Democratic Renaissance

All this potential, however, might be squandered. Technological change might not enhance democracy and, according to some skeptics, it is already harming it. Critics level three charges against the new media.<sup>7</sup>

First, the new media relies on old media, which it is choking off. Yes, the new media generates important stories, like Sarah Palin's "death panels" on Facebook or the Tunisian uprising powered by rocks and cell phones. But these stories—like almost every other story—became important when traditional media ran them. Newspapers, networks, and cable channels still develop and spread most news. What news sites get the most hits on the web? Those associated with traditional media (see Table 9.1). The top twenty-five web sites feature the familiar players: twelve newspapers, five television networks, and two radio chains.

**Table 9.1** Visited News Sites in 2010, Nielsen

RANK	DOMAIN	UNIQUE VISITORS
1	Yahoo! News Websites	40459
2	CNN Digital Network	35658
3	MSNBC Digital Network	31951
4	AOL News	20821
5	NYTimes.com	15948
6	Fox News Digital Network	15502
7	ABCNEWS Digital Network	13251
8	TheHuffingtonPost.com	11510
9	Google News	11382
10	washingtonpost.com	10095
11	CBS News Network	9947
12	USATODAY.com	9147
13	LA Times	8314
14	Daily News Online Edition	7247
15	BBC	6519
16	Examiner.com	6242
17	Bing News	4855
18	The State Group Websites	4526
19	Topix	4409
20	Boston.com	4336
21	New York Post Holdings	4314
22	Telegraph	4044
23	Guardian.co.uk	3885
24	NPR	3835
25	Chicago Tribune	3785

Source: Nielsen, Pew Center.

Search engines and web-based outlets like Yahoo, AOL, and Google all mainly link to stories posted by traditional news sources—*The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, CNN, and ABC. But here is the bad news: The portals and search engines grab the revenue. In short, the web relies on the same old news sources but has found a way to avoid paying them. The people who gather the news—for old and new media alike—find it difficult to get paid for their services. As they cut their own costs, news coverage gets thinner and less reliable—and the old media’s downward spiral affects most of the stories that people read on their laptops and cell phones.

Second, the skeptics dismiss the web’s promise for elevating new voices. Individuals can write all they want, but few will actually be read. There is no denying the reach of Matt Drudge or Daily Kos. But they are rare exceptions. Look again at the measure of Nate Silver’s success: his posts now run in the *New York Times*, the essential old media.

Third, the web incubates lies, malice, and falsehood. Rumors start and spread. Our hyper-partisan era puts a premium on running people down—and the Internet makes it easy. For example, even before President Obama was elected, the web buzzed with stories that he is Muslim and that he was not born in the United States. (He is a Christian and was born in Hawaii.) Posting a certified copy of Obama’s birth certificate, newspaper announcements of the birth, and a long-form birth certificate did not end the falsehoods flying through cyberspace. Racism, anti-Semitism, misogyny, and character assassination all flourish in the hyper-connected, often anonymous new media. The democratic promise of the web comes with a dark side.<sup>8</sup>

In sum, critics worry that the Internet and the new media will have a corrosive effect on American democracy. They point out that news on the web is still dominated by the same traditional news organizations, which provide content while getting a shrinking share of revenue. Yes, people can post and blog, but not many develop an audience. Finally, the speed and connectivity of the web can lead to misinformation and malice as easily as communication and community.

### Box 9.1 Selling Old Products via New Media

Once upon a time (not very long ago), if the folks who sold milk wanted to spread the word about their product, they ran an ad in the local paper. Since lots of people read the paper, the ad could be pretty boring and still reach a lot of eyes.

Today there are so many sources of news that it is difficult to grab attention. Imagine you are a dairy producer hoping to boost purchases of milk—a familiar, healthy product. Your advertising rep shows up with a new, attention-getting ad for one of milk’s newly discovered health benefits. The agency has built a

microsite called [everythingidoiswrong.org](http://everythingidoiswrong.org). To attract an audience, they’ve opted for crude, sarcastic comedy. The site pretends to advise men how to deal with their partner’s PMS. The tagline: “Milk Can Help Reduce the Symptoms of PMS.”

Do you green-light this, um, unconventional approach? The California Milk Processor Board faced exactly this decision—and decided to give the ad campaign a try. Site visitors were not amused, and they let the Milk Processor Board know it. “Wrong,” texted one visitor to the web page. “Milk ad campaign

blames PMS, insults women.” The Board, stung by the backlash, shut down the site and replaced it with an apology. The mainstream media picked up the story and spread it, further embarrassing the campaign’s sponsor.

Moral: The crowded new media environment leads to strange antics designed to attract attention. But here’s the positive side. The eyeballs can talk back. After just one day, the web site disappeared because visitors told the milk people their idea of humor was offensive.<sup>9</sup>

**THE BOTTOM LINE**

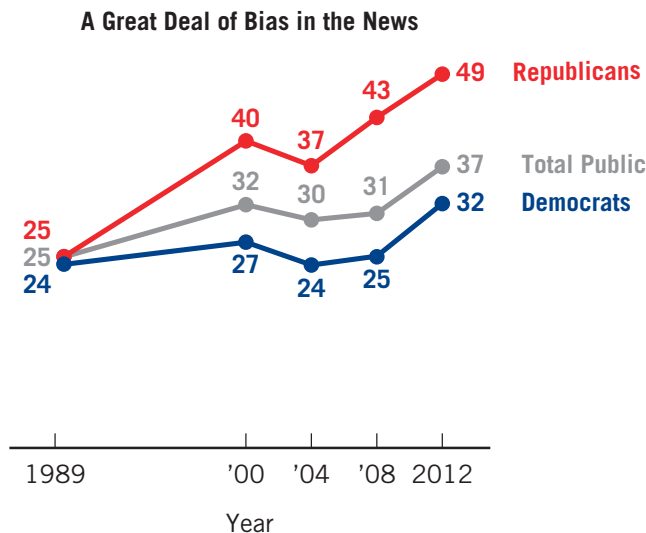
- The new media is undergoing a revolution that is changing the way Americans produce and process news and political information.
- A new era of activism and connection may refresh American democracy. Or troubling developments may diminish it.
- Whether new media enhances our communal lives or diminishes it is, ultimately, in our own hands.

**Is the Media Biased?**

“What you have to do in order to earn the approval of the people in the media,” declared Rush Limbaugh on his radio show, is “to adopt their causes,” such as global warming. “And it really helps if you take a position opposite me.” Conservative media draws strength from a furious charge: The mainstream media is too liberal. Even Jon Stewart, the left leaning host of the Daily Show, jabbed the networks for the positive hype they gave candidate Barack Obama when he made a trip to the Mideast. “After a quick meet and greet with King Abdullah,” Stewart wryly observed, “Obama was off to Israel, where he made a quick stop at the manger in Bethlehem, where he was born.”<sup>10</sup>

Liberals also charge the media with bias. In his book *What Liberal Media?* Eric Alterman complains that the news corps rarely challenges the rich, the powerful, or the status quo. The media breathlessly tracks the stock market but rarely tells stories about the rise of inequality. It reports the Washington food fight and ignores labor issues, child poverty or homelessness. All the right’s hoopla about media bias is, from this liberal perspective, a ruse to cow the mainstream media. And it works: mainstream correspondents respond by leaning over backward to prove they are not biased. One out of three Democrats believes the media is biased.<sup>11</sup>

Which is it? A powerful left-wing media out to destroy conservatives? Or a timid set of reporters, editors, and producers, collectively bullied by the right? We



● **Figure 9.6** News Bias. Half of all Republicans and a third of Democrats believe the media is biased. The feeling has grown over the past 25 years—especially among Republicans. Source: Pew Research Center, January 4–8, 2012. Q60.

suggest that the media is indeed biased, but not in the way either side imagines. The largest media bias comes from the media's purpose. Broadcasting companies, newspapers, and political websites are in business to make money. Much of the time, they print or say or film what they think will draw an audience.

### Reporters Are Democrats

Conservatives are correct about the press corps' personal attitudes. Reporters in the mainstream media are more liberal than the country as a whole. Roughly 85 percent of the press corps calls itself liberal or moderate, compared to about 60 percent of the population. Although most reporters call themselves moderates (especially those in the local media, where the number runs well above 60 percent), very few are self-described conservatives. Moreover, the press corps tends to vote for Democratic presidential candidates.

However, dozens of studies about election campaigns fail to show a systematic media bias toward Democratic candidates. Scholars have searched for bias in coverage, in statements, and in the kinds of stories that are aired. Some studies in some elections did find favoritism. Overall, however, the media does not lean either to Democrats or to Republicans during election campaigns.

There have been fewer studies of media bias outside of elections. Perhaps reporters' views creep into coverage of policy fights or presidential speeches. We don't have hard evidence of an answer. However, there is hard evidence that a much deeper bias runs through the news media—the need to draw a larger audience.

### Profits Drive the News Industry

What does the media actually sell? It is not news about government actors or election campaigns. Media sells its audience to advertisers. As a result, the prime directive is to expand the audience. When ratings rise, the media source prospers; when they fall, networks replace anchors and newspapers cut staff. These financial realities give the news media a strong incentive to pitch its own politics near the views of its audience. For the large networks, that means the political center, where most Americans are comfortable. And, that's why both left and right complain about bias; the center *is* to the left of conservatives and to the right of liberals. At the same time, each publication and each network seek its own audience. More conservative communities usually get more conservative newspapers, and the current media is, as we have seen, divided into strong partisan niches.

In short, the market forces each news source toward the politics of its audience. That pressure, however, is just the start of the market's influence on the media. Some of the major biases it introduces are the search for drama, conflict, and scandal.

### Drama Delivers Audiences

Dramatic events draw big audiences. There's not much excitement in a school board meeting or a health care proposal. Miners trapped below the earth, on the other hand, pull people to their televisions and radios. A good drama must have a narrative arc with a beginning, middle, and end. It has a protagonist (the miners), pathos (anxious spouses), a villain (the coal company or the government regulators), drama (will they be rescued before they run out of air?), an ending (tired but jubilant miners hugging their families), and a take-home message (we need to worry about mine safety).

Do not be fooled by the political moral at the end of the episode. Real mine safety raises complicated—and boring—policy issues that will not attract much of



● The rule for local news: If it bleeds, it leads.

an audience. You can be sure that when the state legislature debates mine safety, the cameras and reporters will be chasing the next drama.

Local news gets much of its drama out of crime. A classic rule of thumb guides the local TV news: “if it bleeds, it leads.” Many good things may have happened in the city, but the lead story features the day’s most grisly event. The images are familiar to the point of cliché—the breathless reporter live on the scene, yellow tape blocking the area, grim-faced cops or firefighters in the background, weeping relatives in a daze, and perhaps a blank-faced perpetrator blinking into the camera.

The need for drama transforms election coverage as well. It rarely focuses on the issues, an audience turnoff. Instead, it is about the drama of two protagonists, their families, their strategies, their dirty tricks, and their blunders. Elections have a built in narrative arc with all the familiar features: a *beginning* (the candidates throw their hat into the ring), a *middle* (who is ahead? who had the best week?), a *conclusion* (someone wins), and a *take-home message* (the loser had a fatal flaw that other candidates should avoid).

Political debates—about the environment, government spending, education, or taxes generally reflect the same pressure to build a narrative. Regardless of the issue, media coverage focuses on drama and conflict, heroes and villains, winners and losers.

Check out today’s newspaper or your favorite news website. Can you see the dramatic narrative that frames the headline story? Pundits often criticize the lack of substance in the news. However, as a student of political science, you have learned to examine the *institution* and its incentives. The media, seeking a large audience to serve to advertisers, covers whatever attracts most attention. Simply calling for serious coverage will not change the incentives in the media market.

### Conflict Draws an Audience

Fights are the easiest way to provide drama. Almost all political stories turn on conflict—legislative debates, Supreme Court decisions, political campaigns, or



● Congressman Joe Wilson shouts, “you lie” during President Obama’s state of the union message.

foreign-policy showdowns. Each time a political issue makes it to the news, we get a story of two sides, high stakes, winners and losers.

This focus is not necessarily a bad thing. Expressing disagreement is one way to underscore the values that are at stake in a political debate. As we discussed in Chapter 2, the American politics is built on intense political debates—there are at least two sides to our most important ideas. However, too sharp a focus on the conflict can turn policy debates into nothing more than a narrative about victory for one side and defeat for the other. That makes it hard for either side to step down or to compromise.

One of us was asked to debate a minister on a cable station after Janet Jackson very briefly, and inadvertently, bared her breast during a Super Bowl halftime show. We told the producer that, after exploring our different views, we might try to find some common ground. The perplexed producer informed us that the show had already scripted the last shot of our segment. A split screen would have the debaters both loudly talking over each other while the host coolly interrupted: “We’ll have to leave it there for now, but feelings run high on this incident and we’ll be hearing a lot more on this topic.” Unfortunately, searching for common ground does not draw an audience as much as people screaming on a split screen.

### Sex and Scandal

Nothing attracts an audience like scandals—and the bigger the name attached to it, the bigger the media bonanza. President Bill Clinton’s sexual involvement with a White House intern received enormous coverage. A scan of sixty-five newspapers revealed that they averaged more than a story a day for the entire year. During the coverage, CNN quadrupled its average rating. By the end of the year, 97 percent of the public could identify the president’s alleged lover, while only 12 percent knew who was Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Likewise, businessman Herman Cain briefly enjoyed a lead in the polls during the 2012 Republican primaries—but had to withdraw when multiple allegations of sexual harassment made headlines.<sup>12</sup>

Long lists of politicians have become entangled in sexual scandals. A presidential candidate tried to hide his “love child,” a senator “came on to” an undercover vice officer in the Minneapolis airport, and a South Carolina governor was exposed when, rather than hiking the Appalachian Trail as he claimed, he had really snuck away from his wife and four kids to visit a lover in Argentina. Each time a scandal breaks, the press goes into overdrive. Other stories fall off the radar. Jon Stewart offered the perfect description: Watching the media is like watching little kids play soccer. They all go running in a pack after the ball. The herd destroys the foolish politician and then moves on in search of the next drama.

## The Skeptical Media

Some other media biases have to do less with market and more with the profession of journalism. Two are especially powerful: skepticism and objectivity. Back in the early 1960s, Washington reporters were a small, white, male club with a code that winked at extramarital affairs in the White House or fall-down drunks serving in Congress. Then a series of events transformed the media’s stance toward powerful men and women. The moral intensity of the civil rights movement, administration efforts to manipulate the press during the Vietnam War, and the Watergate scandal all made the old accommodations seem irresponsible. How could reporters go easy on segregationists or liars?

Watergate was especially significant in fostering skepticism. Reporters investigated a burglary of Democratic Party headquarters that led directly to the White House. President Nixon had secretly taped conversations in the Oval Office and, pursuing the case of the botched burglary, the Supreme Court forced the release of the tapes. Their content stunned Americans. Nixon had always seemed a bit sanctimonious. Now the public could hear him order aides to “stonewall” the Watergate investigations. Even more shocking, the presidential tapes bristled with ethnic slurs, anti-Semitism, and foul language. (The newspaper transcripts were full of the notation “expletive deleted.”)

Reporters redefined their roles. Rather than acting as chummy insiders, they became skeptics, aiming to pierce through official propaganda and find the hidden truth. Relations between press and politician turned much more adversarial. Each time the members of the press felt misled by an administration, their skepticism grew. For example, Bill Clinton claimed he did not have sex with an intern. (He did.) George W. Bush insisted that Iraq owned dangerous weapons that threatened the United States. (It did not.) The reporter’s gold standard became uncovering lies or bad behavior. When reporters find some dirt, a scandal is declared and the whole media races after the soccer ball in a breathless pack.

## The Fairness Bias

The effort to be fair introduces an unexpected bias. Reporters energetically try to present both sides of each issue. However, when issues do not have two equal sides, the effort creates the impression of a debate that does not exist. Darwin and evolution offer a good example. Periodically, activists (usually religiously inspired) attack a school district for teaching evolution. The media—trying to be fair—interviews individuals on both sides of the issue. Now, teaching evolution in the schools is an important *political* question that can stir passions and swing votes. Among scientists, however, there is no real debate. Modern biology rests on Darwin’s contribution. Reporters create the impression of a scientific debate where none exists.

The fairness bias has led to a new political tactic. Industries looking to block regulations have learned to introduce doubts about the facts even where there is,

*see for yourself 9.5*



Go online to listen to two infamous denials: Richard Nixon declares he is not a crook.

*see for yourself 9.6*



President Clinton claims he did not have sex with that woman.





● *"I did not have sexual relations with that woman."*

in reality, a consensus among experts. Companies that market tobacco, unhealthy foods, or toxic produces, for example, have learned that they do not need to win the debate. They simply do (or fund) research, announce that there are two sides to the issue, and leave it to the media to seek out and present both sides. In some cases, the effort to be balanced creates a false impression. It opens the door to a clever political move—sowing doubt.

#### THE BOTTOM LINE

- The media's biggest bias comes from the need to win ratings and appeal to advertisers. That puts an emphasis on drama, scandal, and conflict.
- The result reflects America's partisan political divisions. As liberals and conservatives wrestle for power, the parties and their followers provide precisely the clashes that the media is eager to play up.
- In a fragmented media environment different information sources tilt the conflict in different political ways.
- The bias of the media exacerbates the partisan tone of contemporary American politics.

## ◆ How Governments Shape the Media

Two major forces shape the media: technology and law. As we have seen in previous sections, technological change constantly opens up new opportunities—from the penny press in 1830 to Facebook today. Laws and regulations guide the way new technologies—like media—develop and grow. In this section, we look at some of the rules that govern the American media; in the next we'll see just how unique

they are by looking at the media in other nations. The guiding rules always reflect political decisions, which, in turn, reflect national values. The United States is home to private media corporations scrambling after profits; in contrast, 69 percent of the people in Denmark are watching public television that they have funded through their taxes.

Democratic nations organize their media in three different ways: First, the government itself can fund the media. This **public ownership** model is familiar in many nations—but not the United States. Second, the government can *regulate* the media to ensure that it operates in the public interest. Third, the government can stand aside and let the *market* guide the media; the assumption in the private model is that private companies will give the people (and the advertisers) what they want.

**Public ownership:**

Media outlets run by the government and paid for by tax dollars.

## The First Amendment Protects Print Media from Government Regulation

The primary rule governing print media is familiar, the *First Amendment*:

“Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech or of the press.” As we saw in Chapter 5, the Supreme Court has been strict about forbidding government interference with the press. It is very difficult to censor news before it appears (known as prior restraint). It is also difficult to prove libel, no matter how viciously someone attacks a politician or a public personality. The same protections extend to the Internet. Congress has tried to restrict pornography, hate speech, and violence—recall that the First Amendment does not protect obscenity or “fighting words.” However, the Court has made it very difficult to regulate obscenity. It has repeatedly struck down government efforts to block content on the Internet with the exception of child pornography.

Market forces impose the limits that do exist. American newspapers, paid for by local advertisers, are generally tame compared with the English tabloids. The Internet, however, operates in a different kind of market—unmoored to local communities and their mores—and as a result it is something of a wild frontier.

## Regulating Broadcasters

Radio and television fall into a separate category. They have been subject to government regulations from the start. As radio stations spread in the 1930s, their signals began to interfere with one another. In 1934 the Franklin Roosevelt administration created the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to referee the industry. The agency began with a political philosophy: The airwaves belong to the public. The FCC would license stations on a given frequency—meaning no more overlapping signals—but in exchange stations were required to be “socially responsible.” When a station secured or renewed its license, it had to show that it operated in the public’s interest. When television emerged, the FCC expanded its jurisdiction to include it.

In 1949, the FCC issued an important regulation, the **fairness doctrine**. Radio and TV stations were expected to devote time to public issues. The fairness doctrine required them to give equal time to each side. If a commentator criticized the Korean War on the air, the station had to give equal time to someone who supported the war. Even though it was not strictly enforced, the fairness doctrine led stations to shy away from political controversies altogether; that way they avoided the bother of achieving a proper balance.

**Fairness doctrine:**

regulation that required media outlets to devote equal time to opposite perspectives.

The fairness doctrine enforced the era’s expectations: sober, nonpartisan coverage of news and politics. It also reflected the technology of the era, which offered

very limited media choices. Finally, the fairness doctrine rested on a philosophy: The airwaves belonged to the public and ought to be guided by the public interest. Each station or channel should offer balanced political coverage and concern itself with the good of the public.

In the 1980s, the Ronald Reagan administration challenged the entire idea of public responsibility enforced by regulatory agencies. It promoted a different political philosophy: end government regulations and let the consumers use the market to enforce what they value. The FCC repealed the fairness doctrine in 1983. When Democrats captured the Senate back from Republicans in 1987, they voted to restore the fairness doctrine but President Reagan vetoed the legislation.

The consequences were enormous. Under the fairness doctrine, each talk show with a point of view would have to be balanced by another talk show from the opposite perspective. A station that broadcast conservatives like Rush Limbaugh would be required to air an equal amount of liberal programming. Repealing the rule opened the door to conservative talk radio, Fox News, MSNBC, Chris Mathews, and Rachel Maddow. Once again, technological changes interacted with the legal rules. Within a decade, changes in both radio (the migration of music to FM that freed up the AM band for talk shows) and television (the introduction of cable technology and the proliferation of stations) enabled the media landscape we have today: A rich and raucous menu of news and politics that reaches across the political spectrum.

Political choices shaped the media we have today. The debate featured two very different philosophical perspectives. One side, popular with traditional Democrats, sees the airwaves as a public good that the people lease to radio and TV stations. In exchange, the government regulates those stations to ensure that they act in the public interest. In this context, the fairness doctrine forces different perspectives to confront one another on every station. This view lost out; but if it had remained in place the media—perhaps even American political discourse—might have been less fragmented, less fractious, and less interesting.

A second view that gained force arose in the late 1970s and 1980s. It defined radio and television as part of the private sector. In this perspective, the market would give the people what they want far more reliably than government regulators. Notice the key point: Different ideas lead to different political rules, which interact with technology to shape the media landscape.

## Protecting Competition

The market model is based on competition. What happens if one corporation captures too much of the market? Might it stifle consumer choice? The question arose when corporations moved to control companies across different media markets—print, radio, and television. Some observers warned that a few companies might come to dominate—and stifle the marketplace of ideas. As it is, the top two radio companies, Clear Channel and CBS, control so many stations that they broadcast to a larger audience (263 million strong) than all 24 of the remaining networks combined. Consolidation, from this perspective, threatens free speech and fair debate.

Those who favor deregulation respond, once again, that unfettered markets reward companies that give consumers what they want. Moreover, they continue, today's media takes so many different forms, from radio stations to iPads, that stiff competition for consumer attention is inevitable. The **Telecommunications Act of 1996** reflected this second view and permitted many forms of cross-ownership. However, the debate about controlling media consolidation lingers on.

**Telecommunications Act of 1996.** Major Congressional overhaul of communications law it opened the door to far more competition by permitting companies to compete in multiple media markets such as radio, television, books, and magazines.

In short, different philosophical ideas about how to best produce the public interest produce very government policies. Those policies, in turn, define America's media. Governments deregulated, technology evolved, and the contemporary media era of many choices and loud politics began.

### THE BOTTOM LINE

- Democratic nations organize their media in three ways: government ownership, regulation, and markets. The United States has relied on the latter two, regulation and markets.
- The First Amendment protects print media from most government regulation.
- Broadcast media in the United States was originally regulated by agencies like the FCC, which imposed the fairness doctrine—a reflection of a less partisan era.
- Deregulation and the rise of multiple media—interacting with new technology that permitted many channels—have created the spectrum of perspectives and views that mark American media today. This may contribute to the high conflict that marks contemporary politics.

## Media Around the World

The American media is different from that of other nations. (Have you noticed how many times we have said that about American politics?) Most nations began with government-operated broadcast media—the one option the United States never pursued. However, the differences may be eroding. The American media has gone global and poses a challenge to the media in many other nations. In some countries, leaders even complain about the “Americanization” of their media.

### Government-Owned Stations

When radio developed in the 1920s, leaders in many democratic nations worried about the new medium's potential power. What if demagogues seized the airwaves? Elites felt that radio should educate, inform, and uplift citizens. Rather than leave radio programming to private entrepreneurs, most democratic countries introduced public stations—owned by the government and funded through taxes. A legacy of strong central governments, going back to powerful monarchies, made government ownership possible without the resistance that would have arisen in the United States. When television arrived, public media ran those stations too. To this day, the publicly owned BBC is the largest network in Britain and draws 38 percent of the TV market; in contrast, the largest commercial network draws just 23 percent. Most other democracies also have popular public stations funded by tax dollars and much smaller private sectors—with fewer stations—than the United States. The robust public media contrasts with the United States where public television draws less than 2 percent of the TV audience. Table 9.2 shows just how different the American media is on this issue of public ownership.

Independent governing boards generally run public TV stations (the party in power is not supposed to influence content). Each country tries to define a mission for its public media. Canada, sitting in the shadow of the big American media

**Table 9.2** Public Television—Abroad and at Home

DAILY AUDIENCE (BY NATION)	TAXES PAID FOR PUBLIC TV PER PERSON	
Denmark	69%	\$130
UK (BBC, Ch 4)	50%	\$90 [BBC only]
Germany	40%	\$130
France	30%	\$51
Australia	19%	\$34
Netherlands	35%	\$50
Norway	32%	\$133
Canada	9% (English speaking)	\$30
	17% (French speaking)	
Japan	17%	\$54
<b>United States</b> ... and even that is extremely controversial.	1.2%	\$3.75
<i>Source: Benson and Powers, Public Media and Political Independence.<sup>13</sup></i>		

markets, requires its public broadcasts to be “predominantly Canadian” and to foster “national consciousness and identity” between French- and English-speaking Canada. In either place, one of its most popular shows is *la soiree du hockey* (or Hockey Night outside of French speaking Quebec). Japanese public television features news about the nation’s bureaucracy and, yes, that is every bit as dull as it sounds.<sup>14</sup>

In contrast, the United States now debates whether to pull government back further: to deregulate the media and to defund the (tiny) public broadcasting network. However, these differences between the United States and other nations, which were once very dramatic, are beginning to fade.

### The Rise of Commercial Media

In the past 30 years, commercial media has developed around the globe. In many places, privately owned stations are drawing audiences away from public broadcasting. Japan’s public networks, for example, have lost viewers, and a conservative government in New Zealand promises to move public funds out of TV New Zealand and simply offer competitive grants to commercial stations.

Some European leaders criticize the rise of commercial media. Although it is popular and draws audiences, they call it crass and exploitative. Some believe it signals a much-feared “Americanization” of European culture. This last charge may seem unfair, as it is Europeans who developed reality TV, and the sexploitation on Italian game shows makes the American version look positively tame. Complaints about Americanization do, however, underline a key point. Although public broadcasting is still powerful in many nations (like Britain, Germany, and Scandinavian countries), the American media model now poses a real challenge to the old public broadcasting model.<sup>15</sup>

## The Foreign Press Takes Sides

Worried friends warned an American correspondent in France that his magazine was checking up on him. The French were baffled by a standard American news practice called *fact checking*—editors double-checking the details before running a story. Fact checking reflects the American goal of fair, objective news coverage. In the United States, as we have seen, media bias is a charge that mainstream journalists take seriously.<sup>16</sup>

European newspapers do things differently. Most countries have a range of national newspapers that each address different political audiences, much like American cable news. Reporters don't just report; they analyze and interpret from a distinctive political perspective. Readers opt for one or another political slant when they choose their newspaper. In Italy, those who lean left read *La Repubblica*. Moderate conservatives choose a newspaper like *Il Foglio*, Communists read *Liberazione*, and Catholics *L'Avvenire*. In Britain, *The Daily Telegraph* is so close to the conservative Tory party that some call it the "Torygraph." On the other side, *The Daily Mirror* supported prime-minister Tony Blair by running an interview every day with a different topless woman who explained why she was a "Blair babe."

European newspapers are not bound by local advertising anxious to avoid offense. Nor do they see themselves as watchdogs, uncovering lies or corruption. Instead, their stance towards the government in power generally reflects their political perspective. Conservative newspapers defend conservative governments and attack those on the other side.

## Newspapers Around the World

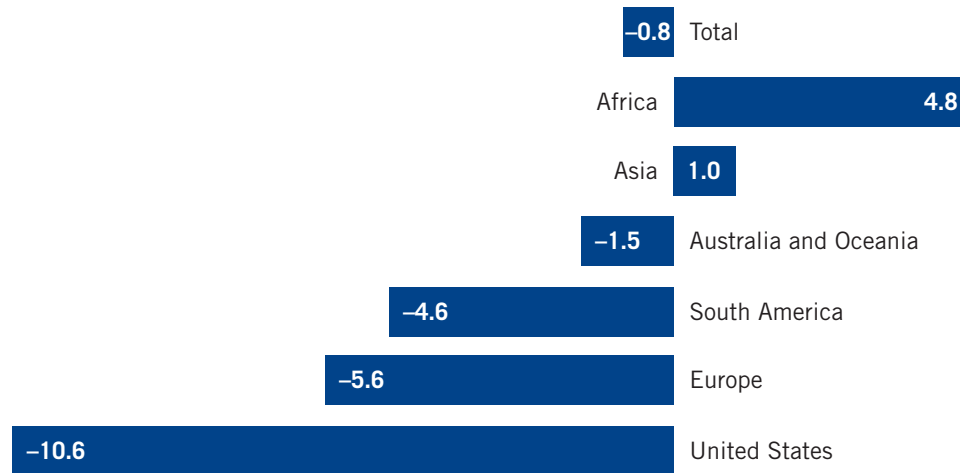
Newspapers around the world face very different situations. Readership is booming in Africa and parts of Asia. In India, the number of readers is rising at more than 5 percent a year—cities like Bangalore feature a dozen newspapers. South American and European papers are declining, though not as steeply as in the United States (see Figure 9.7).

What explains the differences? In Europe newspaper reading is part of one's partisan identity, which helps increase loyalty. At least in some countries, most people regularly read a paper: Iceland (96 percent), Portugal (85 percent), Switzerland (80 percent), Ireland (58 percent), and France (50 percent) all have a higher readership rate than the United States (45 percent). Despite the higher numbers, European nations face familiar challenges: migration to the Internet, less interest among young readers, and a decline in advertising.

Asia and Africa are an entirely different story. Across the African continent, newspaper readership has grown by 4.8 percent, while countries like Oman, Afghanistan, and Bahrain have seen double-digit growth. Why? For one thing, the rise of democracy and a newly independent press make newspapers new and exciting. They reflect the energy of new movements sweeping the nations, a far cry from established democracies where newspapers tend to be seen as your grandparents' news medium. Second, literacy is rising. As a literate middle class emerges, newspaper reading becomes a sign of progress and status. Finally, the Internet—and sometimes the electricity to power it—is not as easily available in the developing world. In very poor nations, like Nepal, electricity is spotty, even in the capital; thus, newspapers and transistor radios are the major source of news.<sup>17</sup>

### Paid Newspaper Circulation

Percentage Change 2008 to 2009



● **Figure 9.7** Newspaper circulation is declining in the developed world while it rises in emerging economies in Asia and Africa. Source: Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism. 2011 *State of the News Media*.

**Source:** World Association of Newspapers 2010 World Press Trends annual report

**Note:** \*Total represents circulation figures by continent. US included for comparison purposes. Circulation figure for the United States sourced from Audit Bureau of Circulations, previous six months ending September 30, 2009.

## Censorship

In this chapter, we have discussed two models. The American media model organized by private entrepreneurs and the government-centered model developed in many other democracies. A third model dominates authoritarian nations and is the most common practice around the world. The government directly controls the media and censors every story. Such control keeps a tight lid on open inquiry, information, and political debate. Censorship has always been the tool of tyrants. Democracies can only operate with the free flow of ideas and information. As Thomas Jefferson famously put it in 1787, given a choice between “a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate for a moment to prefer the latter.” (Once he became president—and suffered vicious attacks—he grew less cheerful about the roll of the press).<sup>18</sup>

The rebellion that swept across the Middle East and the Chinese train episode described in Box 9.2 demonstrate the power of new media. New networks sprang up to spread the news; new technologies permitted people to receive content outside the official channels. Information is now more difficult to monopolize and control. One of the key questions for the future is if (and how) citizens in authoritarian countries will successfully seize the democratic potential in new media forms. Whatever the answer, the crucial link between media and popular government extends far beyond the United States and other democracies, to every nation in the world.

## American Media in the World

American media industries have enormous reach and power. In one summer week, in 2011, [will update], the latest *Pirates of the Caribbean* was the top box-office film in England, Argentina, and Japan (where it had been number 1 for

## COMPARING NATIONS 9.1

An incident in China illustrates how the new media can shake up information control in small ways. A young girl typed a message on the Chinese microblog *Sina Weibo*. “What’s happening to the high-speed train? It’s crawling slower than a snail.” Five days later, another high-speed train was rammed from behind, killing 39 people and injuring 192. Messages from inside the wrecked train, also posted to the microblog site, described bloodshed, chaos, and slow response; they were reposted up to 100,000 times. The official state-run media tried the usual narrative—bad weather, a heroic response, many saved. An incredible 26 million posts from ordinary Chinese citizens overwhelmed that story. Both government and news agencies apologized, changed their approach, and launched an investigation into the crash. As one state-run newspaper put it, the government responded to its “netizens.”<sup>19</sup>

An apology in China is hardly the same as a government falling in Egypt. Both, however, suggest the ways that new media is shaking up authoritarian governments and censorship.



● The crash of the high speed train, picked up by microbloggers, eventually forced Chinese premier Wen Jiabao to lay a bouquet of flowers— with the media very much in attendance.

seven weeks); *Kung Fu Panda 2* topped the charts in Russia, China, and South Korea; and *Transformers 3* was the most popular film in France. American television has a similar reach. And the American media model itself, with its emphasis on markets and consumer choice, has had a major impact in both democracies and authoritarian nations. The fear of “Americanization,” expressed by opinion leaders in many nations, demonstrates the scope and power of American media.



Even so, every nation has its distinct media. Governments remain a major media player in most industrial nations. Looking abroad demonstrates two very different things. First, it illustrates the power and the reach of the American media. And second, it underscores just how unique the American media model remains. Few other nations have organized a system of private entrepreneurs operating within a framework of very light (and heavily criticized) regulatory oversight.

### THE BOTTOM LINE

- The same point we have made about the American media holds true around the world: The rapidly changing media links citizens to their politics. It is a vital key to making democracy work.
- Other nations have relied on government-owned media far more extensively than the United States. The American model of media as private enterprise is spreading, although every nation's media profile reflects its unique values, culture, and political ideas.
- Newspapers, declining in traditional democracies, are spreading in the developing world, particularly Africa and Asia.
- Everywhere the new media is shaking up the old political patterns.

## How the Media Shapes Politics

The media influences, not just how we talk, but what we talk *about*. It sets the agenda and frames our politics. This section describes how.

### News Stories Reinforce Existing Beliefs

Imagine that you're a Republican with lots of Democratic friends. You come across a detailed news story that crushes one of their cherished beliefs. You send it to them with a snide comment—and what happens? Rather than changing their minds, the story simply reinforces what they believe. Researchers have discovered that new information rarely influences people who already have strongly held opinions, especially those “Passionates” who closely follow politics (see Chapter 7). Instead, new information reinforces existing opinions regardless of the content of the story. Many people find the conclusion surprising: News stories do not change the opinions of people who pay the most attention to the news.

However, news stories can have an impact on people who have not already made up their minds. About a third of the American public are Uninvolveds: they do not have strong political commitments, they are less likely to follow the news, and they often do not vote. But they *are* open to influence by the media. Here is a paradox: The news media is most likely to influence the people who pay the least attention to it. Since this group does not follow the news very closely, only news stories with a “**loud signal**” are likely to reach them and influence their views. A loud signal means that a news story gets *broad media coverage* and delivers an *unambiguous message*.

Some stories get wall-to-wall coverage. You cannot turn on a TV or log on without hearing all about them—from hard news sources like the *New York Times* to infotainment like *The View* to shows with limited political content like *Late*,

**Loud signal:** Media stories with very broad coverage and an unambiguous message.



● If a story has a loud signal, they will all be talking about it, as they are here, on *The View*. These are the news items that reach the undecided voters.

*Late Night with Craig Ferguson*. News stories that play across this spectrum are the ones the uncommitted voter will hear. The examples that began this chapter were all efforts to create such a message during a health care debate: Medicare equals socialism; Clinton's health panel will unleash the Washington bureaucrats; Obama's health plan means death panels. These stories will not change minds that are already made up—on the contrary, if you support the plan the attack will increase your support. However, all three examples did influence uncommitted, independent voters who were not paying much attention. In short, if you're looking for a media effect on politics, look for stories with *broad coverage* and a *clear message*. Reason and nuance are not likely to create a loud media signal. Sensible information does not arouse indifferent bystanders.

Media stories influence political activists when they introduce new candidates or unfamiliar issues. When a subject first comes up, most people do not have an opinion. For example, six months before the 2012 presidential primaries, only a handful of Republicans (8 percent) had made up their minds about the party's nominee. Most did not even know many of the candidates. In that context, the media has a major impact by deciding who to cover—and how.

### The Political Agenda

Media outlets may have limited influence on what politically savvy people think, but editors and reporters have enormous influence on what they think *about*. The media leaders listen to the great American political din and pluck out one or two stories to headline and a dozen others for the second tier. Those become the topics that the media seizes on, politicians address, Congress investigates, talk shows debate, and you discuss and tweet and blog. When an issue commands such attention, we say it is on the **political agenda**. And this is generally the first step to political action. If something you care about—homelessness, immorality, or animal cruelty—is not being discussed, it is unlikely that political leaders will pay attention to it. The first step to political action is to get your issue onto the national agenda.

**Political agenda:** The issues that the media covers, the public considers important, and politicians address. Setting the Agenda is the first step in political action.

The surest route onto the agenda is through the media. Setting the agenda is one of the most important influences the news media has on American politics. Politicians, think tanks, interest groups, citizens, and experts all try to influence the agenda. Sometimes they succeed; far more often they fail. Large demonstrations in major American cities against the Iraq war in 2003 got scant mention. Three years later, another set of demonstrations in support of immigrant rights caught the media's attention. As the news reverberated, the demonstrations multiplied and grew. The coverage put immigration issues squarely on the national agenda. Of course, as we'll see in Chapter 17, getting onto the agenda is only the first step in the long political process. How does the media pick the issues it will emphasize? You already know the answer to that: drama, conflict, a narrative, heroes, villains, and a story that sells.

Does the public focus on an issue because the media covers it? Or does the media cover an issue because the public is focused on it? In a classic study, two political scientists asked subjects what issues they thought were most important. Then the researchers broke the subjects into groups and, over four days, gave each group a different version of the nightly news emphasizing different issues—pollution, defense, inflation, and so forth. For the most part, the issues that the subjects saw on the news became more important in their own minds; the media elevated the salience of the issue.<sup>20</sup> In short, when the media focuses on an issue, its importance generally rises in the public perception.

### Priming the Public

The issues that rise onto the agenda and dominate the news affect public perceptions of candidates and officials. This influence is known as **priming**. For example, because the Republican Party is identified with smaller government, stories about government incompetence *prime* the public to see the world through Republican eyes. Stories about the plight of the elderly or the hard-working poor get voters thinking along Democratic Party lines.

Priming is a very subtle form of political bias, because media outlets do not need to explicitly favor one side or the other. Rather, they simply run stories on an important topic—which plays to the strength of one party or one candidate. Candidates are evaluated by the kinds of issues that are featured in the news.

Racial images have an especially powerful priming effect. Certain programs—“welfare” or “food stamps”—immediately raise negative, highly racialized associations. When Newt Gingrich, running for the Republican presidential nomination in 2012, termed Barack Obama “the food stamp president,” he was widely accused of priming: He hoped to diminish his rival by simply raising the subject of welfare programs and, by implications, race and poverty.

### Framing The Issue

There are many ways to cover an issue and each offers a slightly different perspective. When the media chooses a particular slant, we say it is **framing** the issue. Obesity offers a simple example. Is obesity the result of individuals with poor self-control? Or does the problem come from the fast food industry pushing unhealthy calories at children in order to make profits? Perhaps the real trouble lies not in body weight, but in American culture's unrealistic (and even dangerous) body norms? Each of these approaches *frames* the issue in a different way. That, in turn, brings some solutions into focus and makes others irrelevant. If the problem is self-control, then regulating the fast food industry is less likely to be the solution.

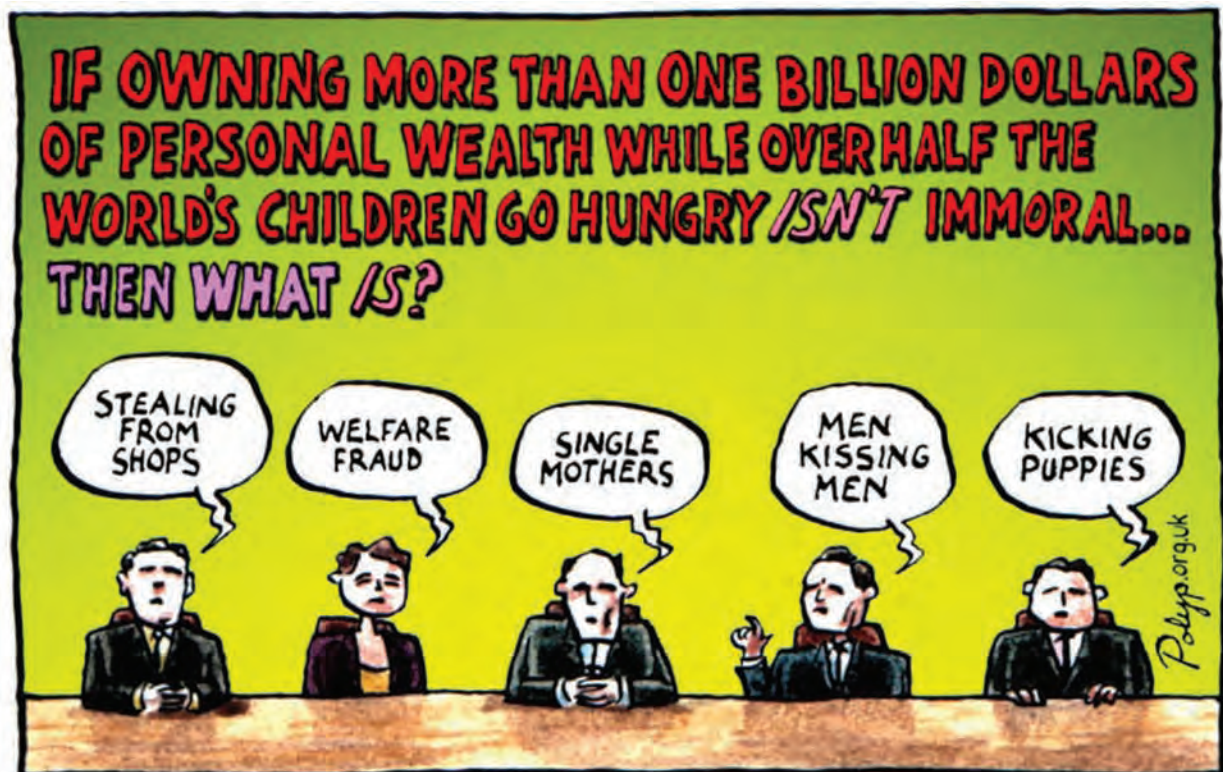
**Priming:** affecting the perceptions of candidate or public officials by raising issues that are perceived to enhance or diminish them.

**Framing:** Influence that the wording of a polling question has on the responses of those being polled; changes in wording can significantly alter many people's answer.

Often, media framing is invisible to most people because it simply reflects social conventions. Once upon a time the issue of equality was framed as a problem concerning white men. The question was whether white, male workers had an honest chance to live the American dream in an industrial system devoted to profits. Later, great social movements rose up and, by mobilizing thousands of people, they reframed the issue of equality as one that spoke directly to race, ethnicity, and gender.

Sometimes, the framing of an issue becomes part of the debate. For example, the Obama administration issued health insurance regulations that required employers to offer contraception as part of their insurance coverage. Catholic organizations challenged the ruling, claiming that it violated their religious beliefs. Then the battle over framing began. Republicans leaped on the issue and claimed that the Obama administration was hostile to religion and was forcing Catholics to do something that violated their faith. The Democrats countered that the real Republican purpose was to attack contraception as part of a “war on woman” designed to set the clock back to the 1950s, before women had legal access to birth control. The two sides were fighting over how to frame the issue: Was it about religious freedom? Or about an effort to limit contraception? Each side felt it would benefit politically if they could frame the issue their way.

Sometimes the media frame is subtle, sometimes dramatic. Either way, the frame defines the nature of the problem, organizes potential solutions, and wipes out alternative policies. Media coverage plays a crucial role—often, *the* crucial role—in issue framing.



'KICKING PUPPIES'

● "Kicking Puppies"

**THE BOTTOM LINE**

- News stories generally do not change minds that are already made up, but a story with a loud clear signal can influence the undecided.
- The media plays a crucial role in setting the national agenda, priming voters to focus on issues that help or harm one side, and framing the way those issues are seen—and resolved.

*see for yourself 9.7*

Go online to see a long list of late night political jokes.

## The Media's Electoral Connection

Every aspect of the media's influence on politics is on full display during election campaigns. David Letterman summarized the demand for a good show after a primary debate in New Hampshire. “Did you folks see the debate in New Hampshire over the weekend? Oh my god, dull. I mean they were so dull that today . . . New Hampshire changed its state slogan from “Live Free or Die” to “Please Shoot me.”<sup>21</sup> The usual emphasis on entertainment now places a particular focus on the horse race: Who is winning and why?

### The Campaign as Drama

Media coverage has evolved and now devotes much less time to the candidate's speeches. In 1968, the average clip of a candidate speaking on the news, called a **sound bite**, went uninterrupted for over 40 seconds. Today, the average clip has fallen to under 8 seconds. After those eight seconds, the candidate's speech is simply backdrop for the anchor or the analyst. You might see the candidates gesture and move their lips, but those are just the visual for analysis and interpretation, often centered on (you guessed it!) why the candidate is winning or losing.

Throughout the campaign, reporters' antennae are always up for gaffes and hints of scandal. When one appears, the entire media throngs after it. Every speech and each debate are carefully combed over for blunders. In Chapter 10 we'll explore whether or not this media whirlwind really matters to election outcomes (the short answer is, rarely). However, the issue absorbs talent and energy. Effective campaigns develop rapid response teams that can deal with whatever crisis gusts through the media on that day. Bill Clinton and his campaign aides weathered a storm that surrounded the appearance of a woman claiming to be his former lover, right in the middle of the crucial New Hampshire primary. George W. Bush dealt with allegations of cocaine use with a simple, firm answer: “When I was young and foolish, I was young and foolish.” Newt Gingrich briefly vaulted to the top of the Republican pack in the 2012 primary when he turned a potential scandal (his second wife alleged that he asked her for an open marriage) into a raking assault on the media. “I think the destructive, vicious, negative nature of much of the news media,” he said to roars of approval at one CNN debate, “makes it harder to govern this country, harder to attract decent people to run for public office, and I am appalled that you would begin a presidential debate on a topic like that. . . .” Gaffes and scandals are part of life on the campaign trail and effective politicians learn how to blunt them—or even turn them to advantage.

*see for yourself 9.8*

Go online to see the Gingrich defense.

## Candidate Profiles

Campaign coverage often features a powerful narrative. The media sketches a profile of each candidate—simplistic, exaggerated, and very hard to escape. That image then shapes future coverage. Once the portrait develops, it reverberates through the world of infotainment. Behavior that “fits” immediately gets airtime, reinforcing the narrative.

The media pictured Barack Obama as cool (“no drama Obama”). John McCain was old. (David Letterman: “I don’t want to say McCain looked old but when he tried to leave the funeral home he had to show his ID.”) George Bush was dumb (Jay Leno: “they call him W so he can spell it”). Mitt Romney came across as insincere in 2008. (Jon Stewart: “He will never let you down . . . in duplicity.”). Images change with each election. In 2012 the media shifted the Romney image into an out of touch rich guy; the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal* ran columns listing the “top ten Romney wealth gaffe’s” leading off with his quip that he appreciated American cars because his wife “drives a couple of Cadillacs.”<sup>22</sup> Comments that would have been ignored in other campaigns rushed to the top of the news with a “there he goes again.”

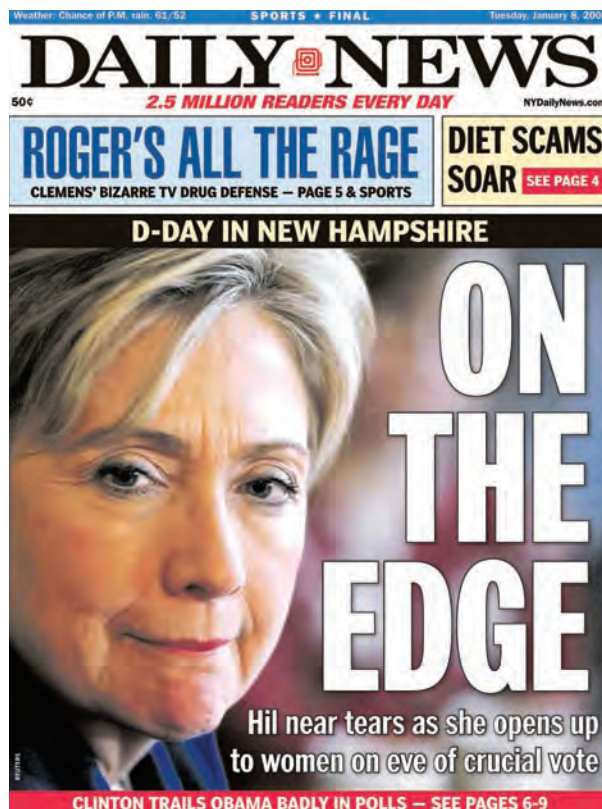
Narratives about woman candidates often fall into gender stereotypes. Hilary Clinton was, for a time, the frontrunner in the 2008 Democratic campaign for the presidency; she was cast as the grind, the shrew, the scold, the harpy, and the emasculator. The Democratic leader in the House, Nancy Pelosi, shared a similar image. Sarah Palin, the Republican vice presidential candidate, was portrayed as a ditz, a diva, an hysteric, or a dim but charming beauty queen.

Campaigns constantly try to reset the frame. Hilary Clinton famously choked up during the New Hampshire primary when a supporter asked her how she managed. “This is very personal for me,” she responded, creating a video image that

see for yourself 9.9



Go online to see the Hilary Clinton response.



● **Are the rules different for women?**  
*Hilary Clinton briefly choked up during the 2012 New Hampshire primary. The story echoed through the media—and may have helped her come from behind and win the state.*

cut through the official narrative and the reporters. When she came from behind in the polls to win the New Hampshire primary, many analysts speculated that the very personal image, looping repeatedly in the weekend before the vote, made the difference, by shifting the media narrative about her.

Campaigns respond to the shrinking sound bite by creating visual images that will speak louder than the inevitable punditry. Waving flags, cheering throngs, or bales of hay down on the farm all convey images—regardless of media voiceovers. But campaigns have to step cautiously, for there is a fine art to creating persuasive visuals. Some photo opportunities only underscore the candidate's weakness. President George W. Bush seemed to offer a heroic picture when he landed in a flight suit on an aircraft carrier, the USS *Abraham Lincoln*, and declared that major military operations in the Iraq war had concluded. A banner produced by the White House proclaimed "Mission Accomplished." When the war dragged on, the photos became an ironic rallying point for its critics.

Campaigns spend extraordinary sums on advertising. Some ads have become classics, usually because of their wicked stings. The Democrats painted Republican Barry Goldwater in 1964 as an extremist, with a spot that featured a little girl plucking the petals off a daisy suddenly interrupted by an ominous count-down and a fiery mushroom cloud.

George W. Bush's 2000 campaign is alleged to have flashed a subliminal "bureaucRATS" in a spot bashing Al Gore's prescription drug plan. The advertisements can become especially effective if they seep into the news coverage and become part of the campaign narrative. That can amplify the signal enough to reach the voters in the middle who are not paying much attention. As in every other aspect of politics, the new media raise the prospect of great changes in campaigning. Facebook and Twitter give candidates a targeted way to circumvent the mass media and speak directly to supporters. Campaigns also use new-media forms to rebut negative stories; they seize the media's role, setting the agenda or framing the issues—at least to supporters.

Ultimately, online activity creates a sense of movement, of belonging. It offers a way to mobilize supporters behind a cause without relying on traditional media coverage. Ironically, the mainstream media eagerly reports on successful new media campaigns—amplifying that success by publicizing it.

see for yourself 9.10



Go online to see some of the most famous fear driven advertisements—starting with the little girl and the Atom Bomb.

### THE BOTTOM LINE

- Media coverage of campaigns reflects the general patterns of the contemporary media. It emphasizes drama, conflict, and the horserace narrative.
- Campaigns attempt to influence the media, or bypass them and speak directly to supporters. These efforts in turn become part of the media coverage.

## Conclusion: At the Crossroads of the Media World

The media reflects the United States—and broadcasts it to the world. It has many critics. Conservatives blast the mainstream media's bias; liberals lament Fox News and Rush Limbaugh; still others criticize the violence or the vulgarity on prime

time. We should remember, however, what makes the American broadcast media unusual: It has always been a commercial enterprise. What survives and flourishes are things that, for better or for worse, draw an audience.

America's media reflects the nation and its people. The fifth largest network in the United States is the Spanish-language *Univision*. Univision beats all the major networks on both Wednesday and Friday nights among young adults (18 to 34 year olds, the demographic that advertisers most seek). In fact, the seven Spanish-speaking networks can boast a total of 258 affiliates. Together, they reach more local stations than any one of the major networks. Nor does the foreign language media stop at Spanish. In San Francisco, Comcast offers 35 foreign language channels, and the Dish satellite menu includes 100 foreign language stations. Sixty million Americans have at least one parent born abroad (including one of your authors) and the media reflects that fact.

What else does the media tell us about who we are? Here's another important indicator: The 10 largest religious networks have 338 affiliates. The largest, The Worship Network, reaches an estimated 69.9 million households (by way of comparison, Fox reaches 112 million).

As we have seen, television in every demographic is being squeezed by the web and the new media. And, in this booming new category, it is America's young people that drive the change—pioneering new technologies, picking winners and losers among sites and applications. What had once appeared to be a great digital divide is now falling, as African American and Latino youth catch up. In forums like tweeting, they even nudge to the top of their demographic.

Pessimists lament the collapse of our national community. Every political side now has its own news shows; Americans don't just disagree about their values—they don't even hear or see the same reality. Mainstream newspapers and networks are losing money and, as a result, their capacity to collect the news is declining. The hard news media cut staff and lay off reporters. As the details about national and international events get sketchier, the void is filled by loud, ill-informed opinions. The entire news apparatus dashes after drama, conflict, and scandal. Important issues like education, the environment, and impartial analysis of the health care system cannot survive in this chase for audience where victory goes to the loudest or the most outrageous.

To pessimists, the new media only hastens the demise of the old reflective politics that permitted leaders to work together, to forge compromises, and to address our national problems. Today's media—fragmented, declining, sensationalist—exacerbates the conflicts in American politics.

In contrast, optimists see a thriving democracy where people are active and engaged. Debates in Washington may be long and loud, but that only reflects an energetic nation undergoing enormous change. As media outlets expand, people's choices grow richer. Today, the United States has a broad lineup of news, information, and analysis. Members of the traditional media try to present objective reports as best they can. Cable channels and radio stations get partisans excited about their ideas and their parties. And new media—Internet-based outlets like Facebook and Twitter—permits people, especially young people, to engage in political dialogue like never before. The media stirs up the best feature of American politics: broad participation and strong opinions, which leaders cannot help but hear.

All of these features add up to a nation at the crossroads of the media world. The United States consumes programs and programming in hundreds of languages. All that content offers one answer to our question, *who are we?*:



The United States is multinational and multicultural, bustling with changes and beaming its images to the world—through television, cinema, blogs, and tweets.

**What Do You Think?**

**9.2 Does the Media Enhance Democracy?**

Return to the question that opened this chapter. When you think about the American media, what do you see for the future of democracy and politics? Are you with the optimists or the pessimists?

<p><b>Agree.</b> A booming media enhance American democracy. Media offers new ways to process news, build networks, and interact with leaders. Clicktivism work as a robust new form of political action.</p>	<p><b>Disagree.</b> Media harms democracy. The Babel of voices hasten national decline by chasing sensation and fomenting conflict. New media in particular erodes our news producing capacity, increase inequalities, and offer dark corners that incubate malice.</p>	<p><b>Unsure.</b> Of course, the answer may lie somewhere in the middle, but keep the range of possibilities in mind as you monitor the media in the years ahead.</p>
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**CHAPTER SUMMARY**

- The media links people to information about politics and the wider world. It includes television, radio, newspapers, the Internet, Facebook, Twitter, and more.
- Media technology changes very rapidly and each change reshapes the connections between citizens and their leaders—a crucial criterion for democracy. A big question, however, runs through this chapter: Does today’s media strengthen American democracy or weaken it?
- News sources are changing. Newspapers, television, and radio are all declining. Online news is rising fast. It is the number one source of news for people under 30. The enormous number of news sources blur the line between entertainment and news and report from across the political spectrum.
- The new social media changes news and information. On the up side, users are more active. They can choose, respond, report, comment. and share. Candidates and parties have new ways to connect. On the down side, online media are destroying the newspapers, which are still the most important way

- to develop and spread the news. The new media environment means that we as a society do not share the same news. It facilitates the spread of rumors.
- Yes, the media is biased. Reporters in the mainstream press are less conservative than the general population, but they do not seem to tilt election coverage. The deepest bias—across the entire news media spectrum—comes from the media’s purpose: they are businesses that need audiences to generate revenue. That means that the news emphasizes drama, conflict, and scandal.
- In most other democracies, the government ran the first radio and TV stations and still plays a large role although commercial media is quickly rising. In authoritarian countries, the new social media poses a threat to the old model of information control and press censorship.
- Media stories affect public opinion among people who do not have strong opinions. Since they tend to pay less attention to the news, stories with strong signals (heavy coverage, a strong perspective) will change opinion. The media—and the stories it chooses

to emphasize—help set the political *agenda*, *prime* the electorate, and *frame* issues. This influence gives it considerable power over American politics.

◆ In many ways, the media reflects America. What we watch and hear tells us who we are.

### KEY TERMS

mass media, 00	public ownership, 000	political agenda, 00
personal presidency, 00	fairness doctrine, 00	priming, 00
infotainment, 00	Telecommunications Act of 1996,	framing, 00
new media [add?], 00	00	sound bite, 00
clicktivism, 00	“loud signal”, 00	

### STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Where do most Americans get their news? From local television, network television, newspapers, or the web?
2. What source do young Americans (18–29) rely on most for their news?
3. Name two problems most analysts see in the decline of the newspaper. What do you think? Do you agree that these are problems? Why or why not?
4. How is the American media biased? Describe three of its biases.
5. Why are newspapers declining?
6. Name three ways in which the American media is different from that of other nations. Be sure to consider the questions of ownership, objectivity, and investigation.
7. Chose a newspaper and look at today’s headlines. Can you find “a media narrative” in the story. Do you see a narrative arc, drama, conflict, good guys and bad guys? Can you come up with a more objective way to present the story?
8. Research a potential presidential candidate for 2016. What does she or he stand for? Now, design a campaign commercial for that candidate. Put her in the best possible light using visuals and voiceovers. Post your creation on YouTube.
9. Pick a story. Read the coverage in the *New York Times*. Now compare the coverage with two other sources: the BBC and Al Jazeera. Identify at least one difference in the way the other two media covered the story.

### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup>See Paul Starr, Goodbye to the Age of Newspapers (Hello to a New Era of Corruption). *The New Republic*, April 3, 2009. See also Suzanne Kirchoff, *The US Newspaper Industry in Transition*. The Congressional Research Service, September 9, 2010. 7-570. www.crs. Gov. R40700.
- <sup>2</sup>Albert Iburguen, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation subcommittee on Communications, Technology and the Internet, May 6, 2009.
- <sup>3</sup>W. Lance Bennett and Shanto Iyengar, “A New Era of Minimal Effects? The Changing Foundations of Political Communication.” *Journal of Communication* 58 (2008), 707–731.
- <sup>4</sup>Pew Research Center for Excellence in Journalism. *The State of the News Media, 2011: Audio*.
- <sup>5</sup>Darrell West, *Next Wave* (Washington: Brookings Institute, 2011), 149.
- <sup>6</sup>Linda A. Jackson et. al, “Race, Gender, and Information Technology Use: The New Digital Divide.” *CyberPsychology and Behavior*. Vol. 11, N. 4. 2008.: 437–442.
- <sup>7</sup>See Matthew Hindman, *Myth of Digital Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).
- <sup>8</sup>See Saul Levmore and Marth Nussbaum, eds. *The Offensive Internet* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).
- <sup>9</sup>You can check out milk’s apology at *everything idoiswrong.org*. The story appeared in Stuart Elliot, “Milk Campaign Ended Amid Social Media Firestorm, *New York Times*, Friday July 22, 2011, B3.
- <sup>10</sup>Doris Graber, *Mass Media and American Politics*, 8th ed. (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2010), 203.
- <sup>11</sup>Eric Alterman, *What Liberal Bias? The Truth about Bias and the News*. New York. Basic, 2003.

- <sup>12</sup>Doris Graber, *Mass Media and American Politics*, 266.
- <sup>13</sup>Data from Rodney Benson and Matthew Powers, *Public Media and Political Independence*. February 2011. You can read the report here <http://www.savethenews.org/sites/savethenews.org/files/public-media-and-political-independence.pdf>
- <sup>14</sup>European media is increasingly overseen by the European Union, which creates different rules for three different sectors: public media, run by national governments (often the largest); commercial media; and fledgling community media. See Josef Frappel, Werner Meier, Leen D'Haenens, Jeanette Stemers, and Barbara Thomass, *Media in Europe Today* (Chicago: Intellect, 2011).
- <sup>15</sup>Andrei Markovits, *Uncouth Nation: Why Europeans Dislike America*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).
- <sup>16</sup>Adam Gopnik, *Paris to the Moon*.
- <sup>17</sup>AC Nielsen's Urban Nepal Monthly Media Survey, reported by MAKARAND CHAUREY, [www.thehimalayantimes.com/fullNews.php?headline=Media+survey+finds+Nepal's+youth+lead+the+readership+pack+&NewsID=276063](http://www.thehimalayantimes.com/fullNews.php?headline=Media+survey+finds+Nepal's+youth+lead+the+readership+pack+&NewsID=276063)
- <sup>18</sup>Thomas Jefferson, Letter to Edward Carrington. Paris. January 16, 1787.
- <sup>19</sup>Michael Wines and Sharon LaFraniere, "In Baring Facts of Train Crash, Blogs Erode China Censorship." *New York Times* 7/29/2011: 1.
- <sup>20</sup>S. Ivengar and D. Kinder, *News that Matters: Television and Public Opinion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.
- <sup>21</sup>*Late Night With David Letterman*, January 7, 2008.
- <sup>22</sup>The quotations are from a phrase used by Obama's campaign, Jay Leno on McCain, A bumper sticker criticizing Bush, Jon Stewart on Romney, and Robert Frank, "Romney's Top Ten Wealth Gaffes," *Wall Street Journal*. February 28, 2012.

