

8.1 Media: Purpose and Function



Image 8.1 Medley of Media Outlet Images

Learning Objectives

- Discuss purpose and function of a free press and media with a government based upon consent of the people.
- Describe the main functions of the media in a free society.
- Explain the difference between various terms related to News Media communication.

Chart 8.1 Learning Objectives on the Purpose and Function of Media

Purpose of the Media

Freedom of the press and an independent **media** are important dimensions of a free society. In a nation with a government based upon the people's consent, information about the actions and processes of government and the needs and views of citizens is essential to maintaining the liberty and security of individuals—this is the basic purpose of free and independent media.

More than 80% of U.S. adults believe the news media are critical or particularly important to proper functioning of our system of government, and Joanna Piacenza of *Morning Consult* notes a an “average 16-point drop in trust for nine leading media outlets” from 2016 to 2020.^[1]

Today, most people are connected digitally and have a bewildering number of choices of information. Compared to the days of the 1970s, when a person might read the morning newspaper over breakfast and watch the network news in the evening, there are now an extreme number of choices in today's increasingly complex world of information.

The proliferation of competing internet-based information sources including social media has changed the power and ability of some of the more traditional news media to influence the political system relative to the days when formal news media monopolized our attention.

One of the reasons citizens turn to the media is for information and news. Ideally, we might expect the media to cover important political, economic, and social events and information in a concise and neutral manner. However, "journalists" are not neutral, free from political bias, or balanced in news coverage, and a 2020 Gallup/Knight study "found the gap is growing between what Americans expect from the news and what they think they are getting.

Perceptions of bias are increasing too, which further erodes the media's ability to deliver on its promise to our democracy."^[2] Media objectivity and honesty is questioned by both partisans as well as reasonably objective analysts. The proliferation of **fake news** stories and suppression of stories poses an additional challenge to media outlets and the public alike.

Consider the Original

Excerpt from Thomas Jefferson to George Washington, 9 September 1792...

[...] [N]o government ought to be without censors: & where the press is free, no one ever will. [I]f virtuous, it need not fear the fair operation of attack & defence: nature has given to man no other means of sifting out the truth either in religion, law, or politics. I think it as honorable to the government neither to know nor notice its sycophants or censors, as it would be undignified & criminal to pamper the former & persecute the latter. (Credit: Monticello, VA, September 9, 1792; National Archives: Founders Online at <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-11-02-0049>)

Excerpt of Letter from Thomas Jefferson To Adamantios Coray, 31 October 1823...

[...] Freedom of the Press, subject only to liability for personal injuries. this formidable Censor of the public functionaries, by arraiging them at the tribunal of public opinion, produces reform peaceably, which must otherwise be done by revolution. [I]t is also the best instrument for enlightening the mind of men, and improving him as a rational, moral, and social being. (Credit: Monticello, October 31, 1823; National Archives: Founders Online at <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/98-01-02-3837>)

Chart 8.2 Excerpts from Jefferson on the Press

Functions of the Media

Functions of Media in a Republic	Description of Functions
Report News	⇒ inform and alert citizens with information to help them form opinions about political issues and candidates
Public Forum	⇒ point of open access for the public to discuss political issues (linkage institution)
Agenda Setting	⇒ highlighting or choosing which issues or topics deserve discussion
Accountability	⇒ informing citizens of what government is doing; informing government of citizen opinions helps responsiveness

Chart 8.3 Functions of the Media and Descriptions

We expect the media to report news that informs and alerts us with information to form opinions about the world around us, our government, politicians and policies, etc. The media also serves as a point of access for the public; that is, they function as a **public forum** for discussion of issues. The media exist to fill several functions, all are essential for the functioning of a representative republic.

These functions should help maintain the republic and keep the government **accountable** for its actions, even if a branch of the government is reluctant to open itself to public scrutiny. Because it is difficult for the average citizen to fully monitor all the government is doing, we rely on media to monitor what is happening and sound an alarm when the public needs to pay attention, thus engaging in **agenda setting**.^[3]

By not only informing the public about what government is doing but also by encouraging citizens to express their concerns over public issues, the media encourages responsiveness to citizen viewpoints.

Thus, the media perform an essential function of two-way communication between citizens and their representatives. In totalitarian governments, citizens receive only one-way communication, sharing only what the government wishes to tell and say. Sometimes the public seeks opinion and analysis of complicated issues. Providing such opinions and analysis is another important agenda-setting function performed by the media.

Media Basic Terms



Image 8.2 One of the First Women Reporters

Ruth Anderson, one of the first women reporters, 1943.
(Credit: Library of Congress, Ann Rosener, Photographer, United States Office of War Information)

The term **media** defines several different communication formats including television, print magazines and newspapers, radio, and internet. Each form of media has its own complexities and uses. The internet also facilitates the flow of information through social media, allowing for instant communication--sometimes unfiltered or unedited for accuracy. Some forms of media have verbal expression, while others communicate through non-verbal means. While some convey information, ideas, and analysis; other media convey feelings and opinions. Media outlets also differ concerning their role in the political system. In a representative republic, we need media to be independent of government interference to assist accountability and responsiveness to citizens.

Essential Terms for News Media Communication			
Media	Roles	Expression	Journalism
Communication Outlets Storage and Delivery of Information and Data Print Audio/Visual Photography Cinema Broadcasting Radio Television Advertising Internet	Ideally to be independent of government interference. Partisan press? Ideological advocacy? Prioritizing news? Propaganda tool? Opinion exchange? Two-way communication	Verbal and Nonverbal Conveying thoughts or feelings Conveying information, ideas, and analysis	A person working for a newspaper, magazine, news website, etc. that investigates occurrences and reports facts rather than offering opinions. Providing analysis and opinion. Also known as citizen journalist, reporter, correspondent, columnist, writer, commentator, reviewer, or blogger.

Chart 8.4 Essential Terms for Media Communication

While some outlets strive to act as critical and neutral information filters, others view their role as providing partisan or ideological advocacy. Some internet search and social media platforms openly filter and suppress information. Whether such filtering is in the best interest of citizens is currently debated in Congress. In Senate Judiciary Committee hearings in December 2020, Texas’ Senator Ted Cruz commented--in connection to testimony by large tech companies regarding “control of public debate” on the internet--“Silicon Valley believes there is no power on Earth that can constrain them.”^[4] Cruz is also quoted as saying, “Even if you happen to temporarily like the politics of Big Tech today, I ask my colleagues on the Democratic aisle, do you really want to submit total control of the public debate to a handful of Silicon Valley billionaires, modern day oligarchs? With money and power and no accountability? They are not elected by your voters. They are not elected by my voters. They’re not

elected by anyone.”^[5] While news media communication is often conveyed by persons who are paid professionals and employed by an outlet (known as journalists, reporters, commentators, columnists, pundits, etc.) other news is conveyed by non-paid citizen journalists, who frequently use the internet social media outlets to offer opinions and analysis of the news.

All media formats are subject to **agenda setting**, where individuals or groups with personal, professional, or political agendas use their position to forward agendas. Agenda setting happens in the act of choosing which issues or topics deserve public discussion or should be reported. For example, in the early 1980s, famine in Ethiopia drew worldwide attention, which resulted in increased charitable giving to the country. Yet the famine had been going on for a long time before it was *discovered* by western media. Even after the discovery, it took video footage to gain the attention of the British and U.S. populations and start the aid flowing.^[6] In major media outlets, especially in newspapers, radio, cable TV, and broadcast TV, media editors work in the background of the newsroom assigning stories, approving articles, and editing content for direct news stories. This editorial function is sometimes called **gatekeeping**, with editors having considerable influence over what news stories are eventually reported upon and seen by the public and the tone and frame of the story. If owners or editors have an ideological or partisan agenda, it is easy to promote that agenda via the process of producing the news and “reporting the news.”

Media: Questions to Consider
1. What does it mean to have a free news media? 2. What is the purpose of free press in the U.S.? 3. What are the main functions of a free press? 4. How do the media contribute to informing citizens and monitoring politicians and government and how do we measure their impact? 5. In what ways is media responsible for promoting the public good?
1. <i>news outlets are independent of government ownership; not run by government and functions without government censorship of news/information</i> 2. <i>provide information about the actions of government and the needs and views of citizens in order to maintain liberty and security of the people</i> 3. <i>report news about governmental actions and important issues; provide a public forum for discussion of political issues; investigate thoroughly and provide factual information as free from bias as possible; promote accountability and responsiveness of public officials</i> 4. <i>monitoring activities of individuals and government entities; impact varies by individual opinion</i> 5. <i>it can provide citizens with information about local and national government; bring awareness to issues; expose government wrongdoing</i>

Media: Terms to Remember

agenda setting—the media’s ability to choose which issues or topics get attention

fake news—false stories spread mainly via internet, social media and texting

gate-keeping—editorial function performed by individuals in a news room who assign stories to news reporters, approve articles and edit content for accuracy and clarity, exercising considerable influence over what news stories are eventually seen by the public and the tone and frame of the story

mass media—the collection of all media forms that communicate information to the general public

media—different forms of communication from television and radio to newspapers and the internet

print media—newspapers, news magazines, news you may hold in your hand

public forum—a function of the media in which they provide an open point of access for the public for the discussion of issues

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8.2 Media: Evolutionary Change and Development



Image 8.3 Photo of Smart Phone

Media access by phone. Credit: Creative Commons Image

Learning Objectives

- Discuss the history of a free press in the United States.
- Discuss a brief history of major news media formats.
- Compare important changes in news media types over time.
- Explain how citizens learn political information from the news media.

Chart 8.5 Learning Objectives on Free Press and Types of Media

The growth of communications technology allows people today to find more news information more easily than any previous generation. Mass media can be print, radio, television, or internet news. News can be local, national, or international. Outlets can be broad or limited in their focus. The choices are tremendous.

Media Types

Each form of media has its own complexities and communication problems and is consumed differently based upon demographics. For example, age greatly influences the choice of news source (see Pew Survey below). Baby boomers are more likely to get news and information from television, while members of generation X and millennials are more likely to use websites and social media.¹¹

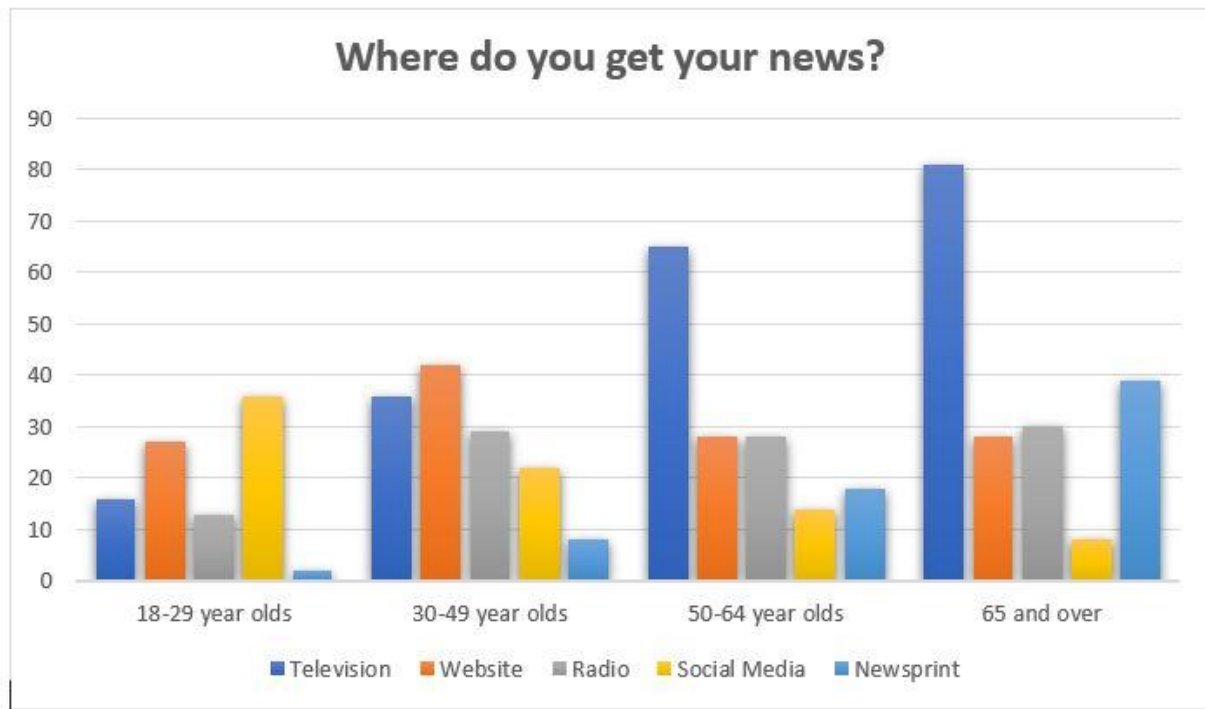


Chart 8.6 Bar Graph on Where People Get Their News

Pew Research Center, "Television Dominates as a News Source for Older Americans," Survey of U.S. Adults conducted July 30-Aug. 12, 2018.

At the very beginnings of the American republic, Samuel Adams, writing under the pseudonym Populus, clearly outlined the purpose of the press (print media) to monitor government and insure freedom and liberty of the populace. Adams wrote, "There is nothing so fretting and vexatious; nothing so justly terrible to tyrants, and their tools and abettors, as a FREE PRESS."^[2] He was writing for print media.

Print Media

Until the early 20th century, news was presented to local populations in the United States through the printed press.

The partisan divisions that occurred during the United States' early history moved the nation into the party press era, in which political party loyalty dominated the choice of news coverage and editorial content. Since subscriptions and advertising did not fully cover printing costs, political parties stepped in to support newspapers that supported their policies. Papers began printing party propaganda and messages, even publicly attacking political leaders like George Washington. Despite the antagonism of the press, Washington and several other founders felt that freedom of the press was important for creating an informed electorate. Indeed, freedom of the press was enshrined in the Bill of Rights in the First Amendment during Washington's administration. The interesting thing about this period is that the press was unashamedly partisan and very open about their bias.

Between 1830 and 1860, machines and manufacturing made the production of newspapers even faster and less expensive. Many less directly partisan newspapers developed and expanded their coverage to

include racing, weather, and educational materials. Joseph Pulitzer and the *New York World* provided a tabloid-style paper including editorial pages, cartoons, and pictures, while the front-page news was sensational and scandalous. As the *New York World's* circulation increased, other papers copied Pulitzer's style to sell papers. Competition between newspapers led to increasingly sensationalized covers and crude issues. This style of coverage became known as **yellow journalism**.

The *New York Times* initiated the **informational model**, which was supposed to exhibit impartiality and accuracy in reporting and promote transparency in government and politics. During the twentieth century, the informational model of journalism and news reporting became the idealized norm for newspapers and broadcast media; however, bias and partisanship remained. Agenda setting was hidden behind this informational model rather than being open and transparent.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the media began a form of **investigative journalism** known as muckraking: the writing and publishing of news coverage that exposed corrupt business and government practices. Investigative work like Upton Sinclair's serialized novel *The Jungle* led to changes in the way industrial workers were treated and local political machines were run. The Pure Food and Drug Act and other laws were passed to protect consumers and employees from unsafe food processing practices. Local and state government officials who participated in bribery and corruption became the centerpieces of exposés.

Investigative journalism still appears today, but the reduction in professional staff journalists at newspapers and other media outlets, creates a lack of time to dig for details in a 24-hour news cycle and makes a profit-oriented news model less willing to commit resources for investigative stories.^[3] There are two potential concerns about the decline of investigative journalism in the digital age.

First, one potential shortcoming is that the quality of news content will become uneven in depth and quality, which could lead to a less informed citizenry. Second, if investigative journalism in its systematic form declines, then the cases of wrongdoing that are the objects of such investigations would have a greater chance of going undetected. Investigative journalism has appeared in a different form through the rise of the internet with social media sites dedicated to investigating issues of public concern. The quality of these investigative reports varies with the degree of professionalism of those associated with these social media sites.

In the twenty-first century, newspapers have struggled to stay financially stable. Given the countless alternate forms of news, many of which are free, newspaper subscriptions have fallen. Advertising and especially classified ad revenue dipped. Print media earned \$44.9 billion from ads in 2003, but only \$16.4 billion from ads in 2014.^[4] Many newspapers now maintain both a print and an Internet presence in order to compete for readers, including *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*. The rise of free news blogs, such as the *Huffington Post*, have made it difficult for newspapers to force readers to purchase online subscriptions to access material they place behind a digital paywall. Some local newspapers, to stay visible and profitable, have turned to social media. Stories can be posted and retweeted, allowing readers to comment and forward material.^[5] Yet, overall, newspapers have adapted, becoming leaner—though less thorough and investigative—versions of their earlier selves.

Radio

Radio news made its appearance in the 1920s. The National Broadcasting Company (NBC) and the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) began running sponsored news programs. Franklin D. Roosevelt was famous for harnessing the political power of radio. He delivered his first radio speech eight days after assuming the presidency in March of 1933.^[6]

Roosevelt would sit down and explain his ideas and actions directly to the people on a regular basis, confident that he could convince voters of their value.^[7] His speeches became known as “fireside chats” and formed an important way for him to promote his New Deal agenda through persuasive rhetoric over this relatively new media.^[8]



Image 8.4 Americans Listen to Radio and Photo of President Roosevelt Addressing the Nation Via Radio

As radio listenership became widespread in the 1930s (left), President Franklin D. Roosevelt took advantage of this new medium to broadcast his “fireside chats” and bring ordinary Americans into the president’s world (right). (Credit Left: modification of work by George W. Ackerman; Credit Right: modification of work by the Library of Congress)

While radio’s importance for distributing news waned with the increase in television usage, “news talk” stations emerged on both AM and FM frequencies, restoring radio’s importance in politics. By the 1990s, talk shows had gone national, showcasing broadcasters such as Rush Limbaugh.

In 1990, Sirius Satellite Radio began a campaign for FCC approval of satellite radio. Satellite radio has greatly increased programming with many specialized offerings, including channels dedicated to distinct political points of view.

Television

Television combined the best attributes of radio and pictures and changed news media forever. Networks in the 1950s such as ABC, CBS, and NBC began nightly newscasts, and local stations and affiliates followed suit.



Image 8.5 Candidates Debate for the Nation on Television

Kennedy vs. Nixon, one of the 1960 presidential debates on television. (Credit: Creative Commons)

Even more than radio, television allows politicians to reach out and connect with citizens and voters in deeper ways. Before television, few voters were able to see a president or candidate speak or answer questions in an interview. Now everyone can decode body language and tone to decide themselves whether candidates or politicians are sincere.

Presidents can directly convey their anger, sorrow, or optimism during addresses. The 1960 election featured the first televised presidential debate. By that time most households had a television. Kennedy's careful grooming and practiced body language allowed viewers to focus on his presidential demeanor. His opponent, Richard Nixon, was still recovering from a severe case of the flu. While Nixon's substantive answers and debate skills made a favorable impression on radio listeners, viewers' reaction to his sweaty appearance and obvious discomfort demonstrated that live television has the unique potential to make or break a candidate.^[9]



Visit [American Rhetoric](#) for free access to speeches, video, and audio of famous presidential and political speeches.

Between the 1960s and the 1990s, presidents often used television to reach citizens and gain support for policies.

When they made speeches, the major networks and their local affiliates carried them. With few independent local stations available, a viewer had little alternative but to watch. During this "Golden Age of Presidential Television," presidents had a strong command of the media.^[10]

Some of the best examples of this power occurred when presidents used television to inspire and comfort the population during a national emergency. These speeches aided in the “rally ’round the flag” phenomenon, which occurs when a population feels threatened and unites around the president.^[11] During these periods, presidents may receive heightened approval ratings, in part due to the media’s decision about what to cover.^[12]

Even in the current media era, the President can use television very effectively during a national emergency. Following the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington on September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush’s bullhorn speech from the rubble of Ground Zero in New York similarly became a rally. Bush spoke to the workers and first responders and encouraged them, but his short speech became a viral clip demonstrating the resilience of New Yorkers and the anger of a nation.^[13] He told New Yorkers, the country, and the world that Americans could hear the frustration and anguish of New York, and that the terrorists would soon hear from the United States.

President George W. Bush embraces a firefighter at the site of the World Trade Center Friday, Sept. 14, 2001, during his visit to New York City. (Credit: Paul Morse, Courtesy of the George W. Bush Presidential Library)

In our current media environment, many local television stations are affiliated with a national network corporation, and they broadcast national network programming to their local viewers, often repeating the same stories with the same exact wording content over multiple stations in many states. Affiliates, by agreement with the networks, give priority to network news and other programming chosen by the affiliate’s national media corporation. Local affiliate stations are told when to air programs or commercials, and they diverge only to inform the public about a local or national emergency. Most affiliate stations will show local news before and after network programming to inform local viewers of events and issues. Network news has a national focus on politics, international events, the economy, and more. Local news is likely to focus on matters close to home, such as regional business, crime, sports, and weather.^[14]



Image 8.6 President Bush at World Trade Center

Cable TV

Cable/satellite programming offers national networks a second method to directly reach local viewers. As the name implies, cable stations transmit programming directly to a local cable company hub, which then sends the signals to homes through coaxial or fiber optic cables. Because cable and satellite do not broadcast programming through the airwaves, cable networks and satellite can operate across the nation directly without local affiliates. Instead, they purchase broadcasting rights for the cable stations they believe their viewers want. For this reason, cable networks often specialize in different types of programming.

The Cable News Network (CNN) was the first news station to take advantage of this specialized format, creating a 24-hour news station with live coverage and interview programs. Other news stations quickly followed, such as FOX News and MSNBC. The Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network, known as C-SPAN now has three channels covering Congress, the president, the courts, and matters of public interest.

New Media Trends

The invention of cable in the 1980s opened more options for media consumers than ever before. Viewers can watch nearly anything at the click of a button, bypass commercials, and record programs of interest. The resulting saturation, or inundation of information, may lead viewers to abandon the news entirely or become more suspicious and fatigued about politics.^[15] This effect, in turn, also changes the president's ability to directly reach out to citizens. For example, viewership of the president's annual State of the Union address has decreased over the years, from sixty-nine million viewers in 1993 to twenty-seven million in 2023.^[16]

Citizens who want to watch cable TV programming can easily avoid the direct news programming although there is an abundance of voices, such as those of talk show hosts and political pundits, who now fill the cable channels.

Another shift in the new media is a change in viewers' preferred programming. Younger viewers, especially members of generation X and millennials like their newscasts to be humorous. The popularity of *The Daily Show* and other similar Cable TV programs demonstrate that news, even political news, can win young viewers if delivered well.^[17] Such **soft news** presents news in an entertaining and approachable manner, painlessly introducing a variety of topics. While the depth or quality of reporting may be less than ideal, these shows can sound an alarm as needed to raise citizen awareness.^[18]

Viewers who watch or listen to programs like John Oliver's *Last Week Tonight* are more likely to be aware and observant of political events and foreign policy crises than they would otherwise be.^[19] They may view opposing party candidates more favorably because the low-partisan, friendly interview styles allow politicians to relax and be conversational rather than defensive.^[20] Because viewers of political comedy shows watch the news frequently, they may be more politically knowledgeable than citizens viewing national news. In two studies, researchers interviewed respondents and asked knowledge questions about current events and situations. Viewers of *The Daily Show* scored more correct answers than viewers of news programming and news stations.^[21] It is not clear whether the number of viewers is large enough to make a big impact on politics, nor do we know whether the learning is long term or short term.^[22]

Internet News and Social Media

The on-demand nature of the Internet has created many opportunities for news outlets. The proliferation of online news has also increased the amount of poorly written and inaccurate material with little editorial oversight, and readers must be cautious when reading internet news sources. While early media providers were those who could pay the high cost of printing or broadcasting, modern media

require just an URL, a web-site address, and ample server space. The ease of online publication has made it possible for many more niche media outlets to form.

In the past, there were virtually no gatekeepers for many internet sites. For example, BuzzFeed allowed members to post articles without editorial review leading to articles of varied quality and accuracy. This has given rise to “fake” news entirely inaccurate and often spread quickly by rumors over the internet. To combat this problem, Twitter and Facebook initiated a gatekeeping function, which has been criticized as a form of politically biased censorship. In July 2021 at the White House daily press briefing, Biden’s White House Press Secretary, Jen Psaki, stated that the administration was in contact with Facebook about “[...] flagging problematic posts for Facebook that spread disinformation.”^[23]

In July of 2023, a U.S. District judge prohibited several federal agencies and officials of the Biden Administration from working with social media companies. An injunction was granted in response to a 2022 lawsuit that alleged that the federal government overstepped in its efforts to convince social media

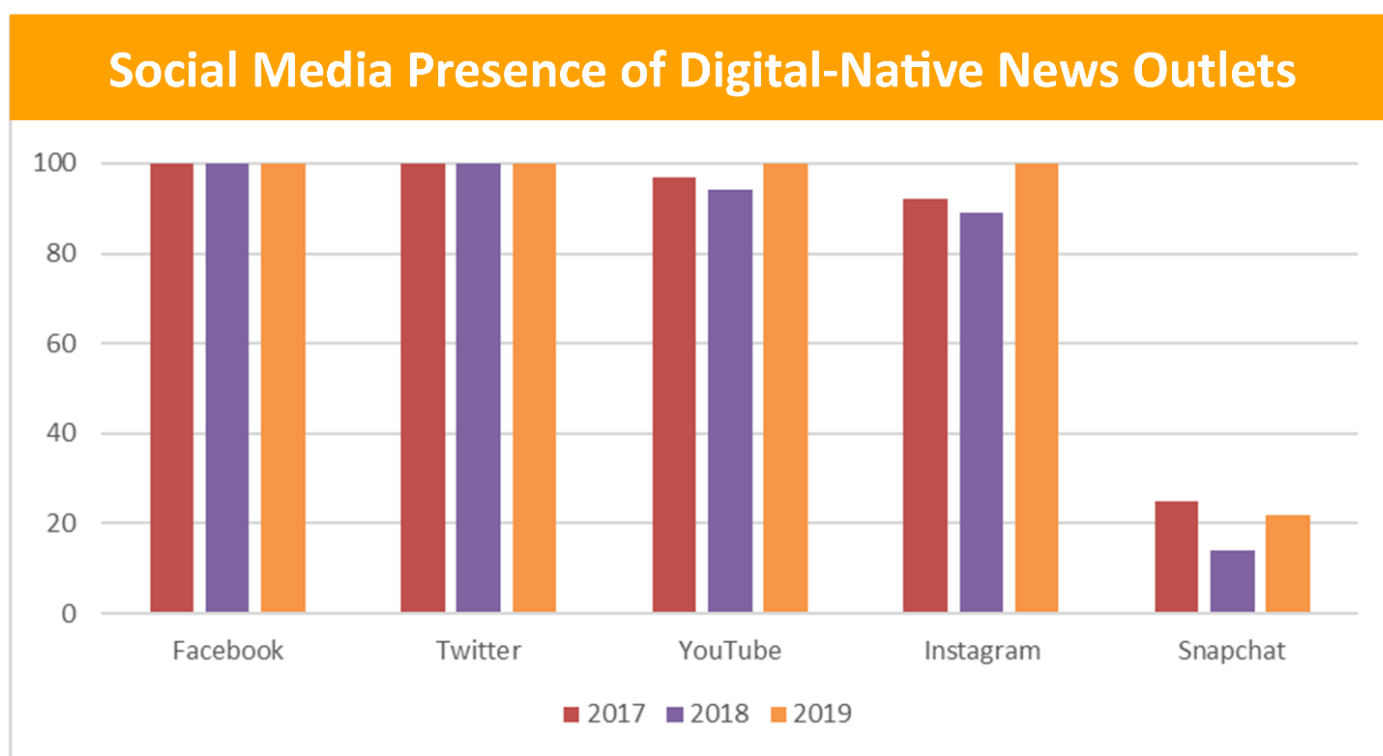


Chart 8.7 Social Media Presence Bar Graph

Pew Research Center, Audit of the 37 digital-native news outlets with the highest traffic, with at least 10 million unique visitors from October-December of the previous year, according to Comscore data, each outlet’s primary domain-the outlet’s flagship website-was analyzed, 23 July 2019.

companies to address postings that could result in vaccine hesitancy or affect elections. The judge cited “substantial evidence” of a far-reaching censorship campaign, which the Administration denied.^[24]

The Pew Research Center identified 37 “digital-narrative” news outlets (that is “born first on the web”) with at least 10 million unique visitors using such social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram and Snapchat.^[25]

These new outlets have original reporting including some with paid staff while others rely upon volunteers. In addition, platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and others allow individuals to voice their opinion on political issues. Social media has placed journalism in the hands of citizens. **Citizen journalism** occurs when citizens, who are not professional journalists from traditional news media use their personal recording devices and cell phones to capture events and post them on the Internet.

When 2008 presidential candidate Barack Obama was recorded by a Huffington Post volunteer saying that some Midwesterners “cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren’t like them” due to their frustration with the economy, the statements became nightmares for the campaign.^[26] As journalism continues to scale back and hire fewer professional writers in an effort to control costs, citizen journalism has become a new normal.^[27]

Before the internet, traditional media determined whether citizen photographs or video footage would become news. In 1991, a private citizen’s camcorder footage showed four police officers beating Rodney King. After appearing on local independent television station, KTLA-TV, and then the national news, the event began a national discussion on police brutality and ignited riots in Los Angeles.^[28] In the late spring of 2020, much of what was first learned about the death of George Floyd at the hands of police officers came from a citizen provided video.

The agenda-setting power of traditional media is often appropriated by social media and smartphones of citizen journalists. Internet sites allow witnesses to instantly upload images and accounts of events and forward the link to friends. Some uploads go viral and attract the attention of the traditional media.

The internet facilitates the flow of information through social media, which allows users to instantly communicate with one another and share with audiences that can grow exponentially. Social media changes more rapidly than the other media formats. A growing number of sites also allow users to comment about the posted information, sometimes publicly and anonymously. Regardless of where we get our information, the various media avenues available today make it much easier for citizens to be engaged, while also making it easier to spread false or misleading information.^[29] It also allows potentially for censorship of individuals and information by such social media platforms as Twitter and Facebook.

Presidents and Use of Social Media

Barack Obama was the first candidate to fully embrace social media, and one of his campaign advisors was Chris Hughes (co-founder of Facebook). By election day in 2008, he had over 2 million Facebook supporters to John McCain’s 600,000; and, he had 112,000 followers on Twitter to McCain’s 4,600.^[30] When Barack Obama’s minister, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, was seen to give inflammatory racial sermons, Obama used YouTube to respond to charges that he shared Wright’s beliefs. The video drew more than seven million views.^[31] To reach out to supporters and voters, the White House maintained a YouTube channel and a Facebook site. President Donald Trump was a heavy user of Twitter during the 2016 and 2020 campaigns and throughout his presidency. In fact, he started his “Making America Great Again” site at USA.gov at <https://www.greatagain.gov> several months prior to his inauguration.^[32] By

contrast, President Biden has been an infrequent user of social media during the first three years of his presidency.

Media Ownership

The question is: Who controls the media we rely on? Most media are controlled by a limited number of conglomerates. A conglomerate is a corporation made up of several companies, organizations, and media networks. In the 1980s, more than fifty companies owned most of the television and radio stations and networks. Now, only six conglomerates control most of the broadcast media in the United States: CBS Corporation, Comcast, Time Warner, 21st Century Fox (formerly News Corporation), Viacom, and The Walt Disney Company.^[33] The Walt Disney Company, for example, owns the ABC Television Network, ESPN, A&E, and Lifetime, in addition to the Disney Channel.

Viacom owns BET, Comedy Central, MTV, Nickelodeon, and Vh2. Time Warner owns Cartoon Network, CNN, HBO, and TNT, among others. While each of these networks has its own programming, in the end, the conglomerate can make a policy that affects all stations and programming under its control.

Conglomerates can create a monopoly on information by controlling a sector of a market. When a media conglomerate has policies or restrictions, they will apply to all stations or outlets under its ownership, potentially limiting the information citizens receive. Conglomerate ownership also creates circumstances in which news media bias and censorship may occur.

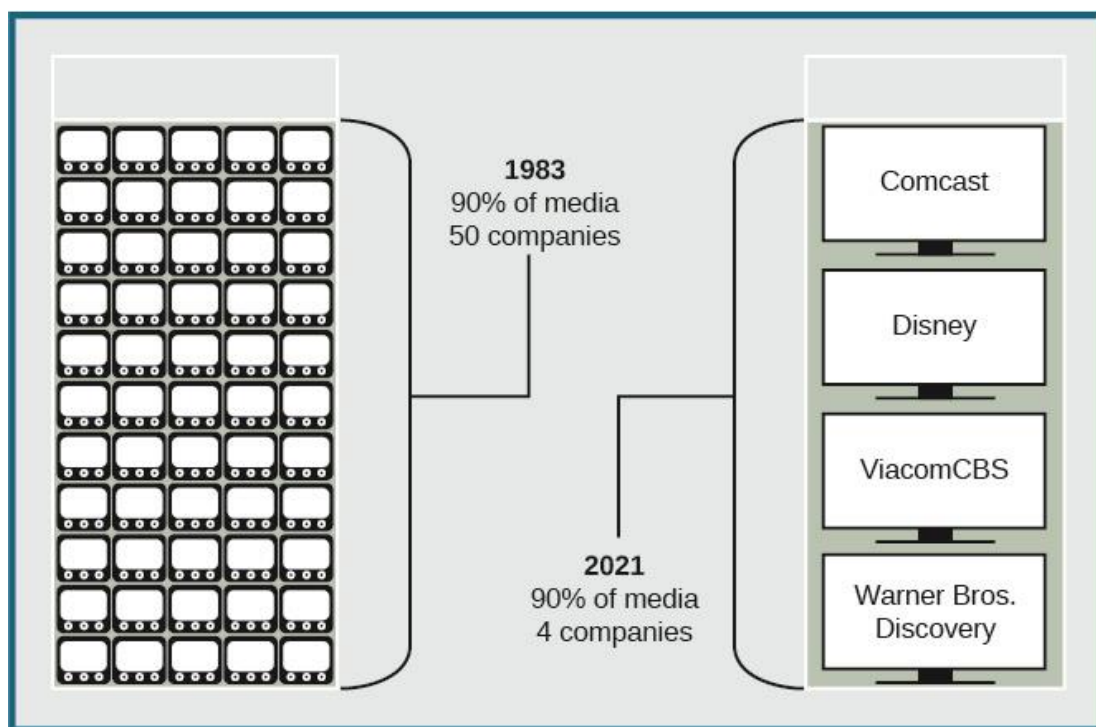


Chart 8.8 Diagram of Media Company Ownership

In 1983, fifty companies owned 90 percent of U.S. media. By 2012, just six conglomerates controlled the same percentage of U.S. media outlets. (Credit: OpenStax included image)

Newspapers too have experienced the pattern of concentrated ownership. Gannett Company, while also owning television media, holds many newspapers and news magazines in its control. Many of these were acquired quietly, without public notice or discussion. Gannett's 2013 acquisition of publishing giant A.H. Belo Corporation caused some concern and news coverage, however. The sale would have allowed Gannett to own both an NBC and a CBS affiliate in St. Louis, Missouri, giving it control over programming and advertising rates for two competing stations. The U.S. Department of Justice required Gannett to sell the station owned by Belo to ensure market competition and multi-ownership in St. Louis.^[34]

These changes in the format and ownership of media raise the question whether the media still operate as an independent source of information. Is it possible that corporations and CEOs now control the information flow, making profit more important than the impartial delivery of information? The reality is that media outlets, whether newspaper, television, radio, or Internet, are businesses. They have expenses and must raise revenues.

Media: Questions to Consider

1. How have modern presidents used television to reach out to citizens?
2. Why is soft news good at reaching out and educating viewers?
3. Describe citizen journalists and how they create news report.
4. How can conglomerates impact news information?

1. *news conferences; event coverage; etc.*
2. *open for discussion*
3. *They are news reporters who are not professionally trained journalists who use personal recording devices or cell phones to develop news stories that are posted on the internet social media sites.*
4. *Conglomerates can create a monopoly on information by controlling a sector of a market, potentially limiting or filtering the information citizens receive.*

Terms to Remember

citizen journalism—video and print news posted to internet or social media by citizens rather than professional journalists of news media organizations

informational model—news media that strives for impartiality and accuracy in reporting, promote transparency in government/politics; an idealized norm for reporting

muckraking—investigative news coverage focusing on exposing corrupt business and government practices

soft news—news presented in an entertaining style

yellow journalism—sensationalized coverage of scandals and human interest stories

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8.3 Media: What is their impact?



Image 8.7 Photo of Types of Media

(Credit: WordPress and Dec 5, 2016 // At Fairfield University; "How Are You Involved In The Media?" Brielle Nesto at <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/how-are-you-involved-in-the-media>)

Learning Objectives

- Identify forms of bias that exist in news coverage and ways the media can present biased coverage.
- Explain how the media cover politics and issues.
- Evaluate the impact of the media on politics and policy-making.

Chart 8.9 Learning Objectives on Impact of Media

Media in all forms affects both society and government. With a primary purpose to present the public with information and alerts about important events, they often affect what we think and the actions we take. The media can also place pressure on government to act by signaling a need for intervention or showing that citizens want change. For these reasons, the quality of the media's coverage matters.

While a recent Gallup/Knight Foundation discovered Americans believe the media should exercise a very essential role in a representative republic, 43% "say the media supports our democracy very poorly or poorly," even questioning their ability of "providing objective news reports."¹¹ From 2003 to 2022 the percentage of Americans who said they have a great deal or a fair amount of trust in the media fell from 54% to 34%.¹²

Most major media outlets want the public to believe in their professionalism; however, a variety of types of bias can creep into reporting. The public, based on opinion polling, believes the media may not be doing enough to monitor and address their concerns.

Media Effects and Bias

Concerns about the effects of media on consumers and the existence and extent of media bias go back to the 1920s. Reporter and commentator Walter Lippmann noted that citizens have limited personal experience with government and the world and posited that the media, through their stories, place ideas in citizens' minds.

These ideas become part of the citizens' frame of reference and affect their decisions. Lippmann's statements led to the **hypodermic theory**, which argues that information is "shot" into the receiver's mind by the media and readily accepted.^[3]

In reality, information is often transmitted in two steps, with one person reading the news and then sharing the information with others. People often listen to their friends, or someone whom they trust, but not to those with whom they disagree. Thus, while additional research has found Lippmann's theory too simplistic, it has been hypothesized under what has become known as the cultivation theory that the media does influence a person's view of the world by presenting a perceived reality.^[4]

What we see on a regular basis is our reality. Media can then set norms for readers and viewers by choosing what is covered or discussed. In their 1977 book, *The Emergence of American Political Issues*, McCombs and Shaw argued that the most important effect of the mass media was "its ability to mentally order and organize our world for us" impacting what issues "to think about," that is, public agenda setting.^[5]

In the end, the consensus among observers is that media have an effect on public opinion formation, even if the effect is somewhat subtle. This raises the question of how the media, even through general newscasts or news reports, can affect citizens' opinions. One of the ways is through **framing**: the creation of a narrative, or context, for a news story. The news often uses framing to place a story in a context, so the reader understands its importance or relevance. Yet, at the same time, framing affects the way the reader or viewer processes the story. Framing may take the form of a broad thematic focus on an issue or highlighting examples of an issue that has high audience appeal. It may involve photo cropping or video editing, which provide visual impact leading viewers to a point of view.



For a closer look at framing and how it influences voters, read [**"How the Media Frames Political Issues"**](#), a review essay by Scott London.

Framing can also affect the way we see race, socioeconomic status, or other generalizations. For this reason, it is linked to **priming**: when media coverage predisposes the viewer or reader to a perspective on a subject or issue. If a newspaper article focuses on unemployment, struggling industries, and jobs moving overseas, the reader will have a negative opinion about the economy. If then asked whether he or

she approves of the president's job performance, the reader is primed to say no. Readers and viewers can fight priming effects if they are aware of them or have prior information about the subject.

Network news similarly misrepresents the victims of poverty by using more images of blacks than whites in its segments. Viewers in a study were left believing African Americans were the majority of the unemployed and poor, rather than seeing the problem as one faced by many races.^[6] The misrepresentation of race is not limited to news coverage, however. A study of images printed in national magazines, like *Time* and *Newsweek*, found they also misrepresented race and poverty. The magazines were more likely to show images of young African Americans when discussing poverty and excluded the elderly and the young, as well as whites and Latinos, which is the true picture of poverty.^[7]



The [Center for American Women in Politics](#) researches the treatment women receive from both government and the media, and they share the data with the public.

Media coverage of women has been similarly biased, leading to uneven coverage of women candidates for public office. Early coverage was sparse. The stories that did appear often discussed the candidate's viability, or ability to win, rather than her stand on the issues. Clearly, the coverage of the 2016 Hillary Clinton candidacy reflects a change.^[8] Word choice may also have a priming effect. News organizations like the *Los Angeles Times* and the Associated Press no longer use the phrase "illegal immigrant" to describe individuals entering the country without benefit of documentation or legal processes.

This may be due to the desire to create a "sympathetic" frame for the immigration situation rather than a "threat" frame.^[9] Likewise, word choice has been used to prime readers on the issue of abortion, such as "pro-life" and "pro-choice."

Readers and viewers can fight the **priming effect** if they are aware of the meaning and use of labels. A key question for students of politics is whether media framing of a news story leads to priming that evidences a political bias. On the other hand, some argue media framing is the natural consequence of the structure of the current media environment with its emphasis on reporting news with audience appeal focusing on conflict, sensationalism, and personality.

The topic of priming by the news media and political bias are obviously closely related. Media news stories presented as fact can contain covert and overt politically slanted material. Covert content is political information provided under the pretense that it is neutral. A television broadcast might run a story on climate change by interviewing representatives of only one side of the policy debate and downplaying the opposing views, all without acknowledging the one-sided nature of its coverage. In contrast, when the writer of a publication makes clear to the reader only one side of the political debate, the political message is overt content. Cable political commentators such as Sean Hannity or Rachel Maddow openly state their ideological viewpoints. While such overt political content may be offensive or annoying to a reader, listener, or viewer, all are offered the choice whether to be exposed to the material.

A Gallup Poll, "Trust in Mass Media Returns to All-Time Low," found that perceived political bias in the media led to a drop in confidence in the media to report "the news fully, accurately and fairly."^[10] As has been the case historically, Americans more often feel the news media is "too liberal" (44%) than "too

conservative” (19%).^[11] Conservatives perceive liberal bias in the media, while liberals think news coverage is “just about right.”^[12] The perception of balance by liberals is significantly higher than the number who self-identify as independents.^[13]

To avoid covert and overt political bias or priming, news readers, listeners, and viewers frequently self-select what media to watch. A study by University of Texas Communication faculty member, Natalie Jomini Stroud, found that media viewing habits are subject to **partisan selective exposure**, where the partisan or ideological orientation of viewers, listeners, or readers determines the choices made on news information sources.^[14] That is, conservative Republicans will likely avoid MSNBC or any outlet perceived as having either covert or overt political bias, while liberal Democrats will likely avoid FOX News. Instead, partisan selective exposure leads to individuals listening primarily to news sources that match (or affirm), and therefore reinforce, their existing political beliefs.^[15]

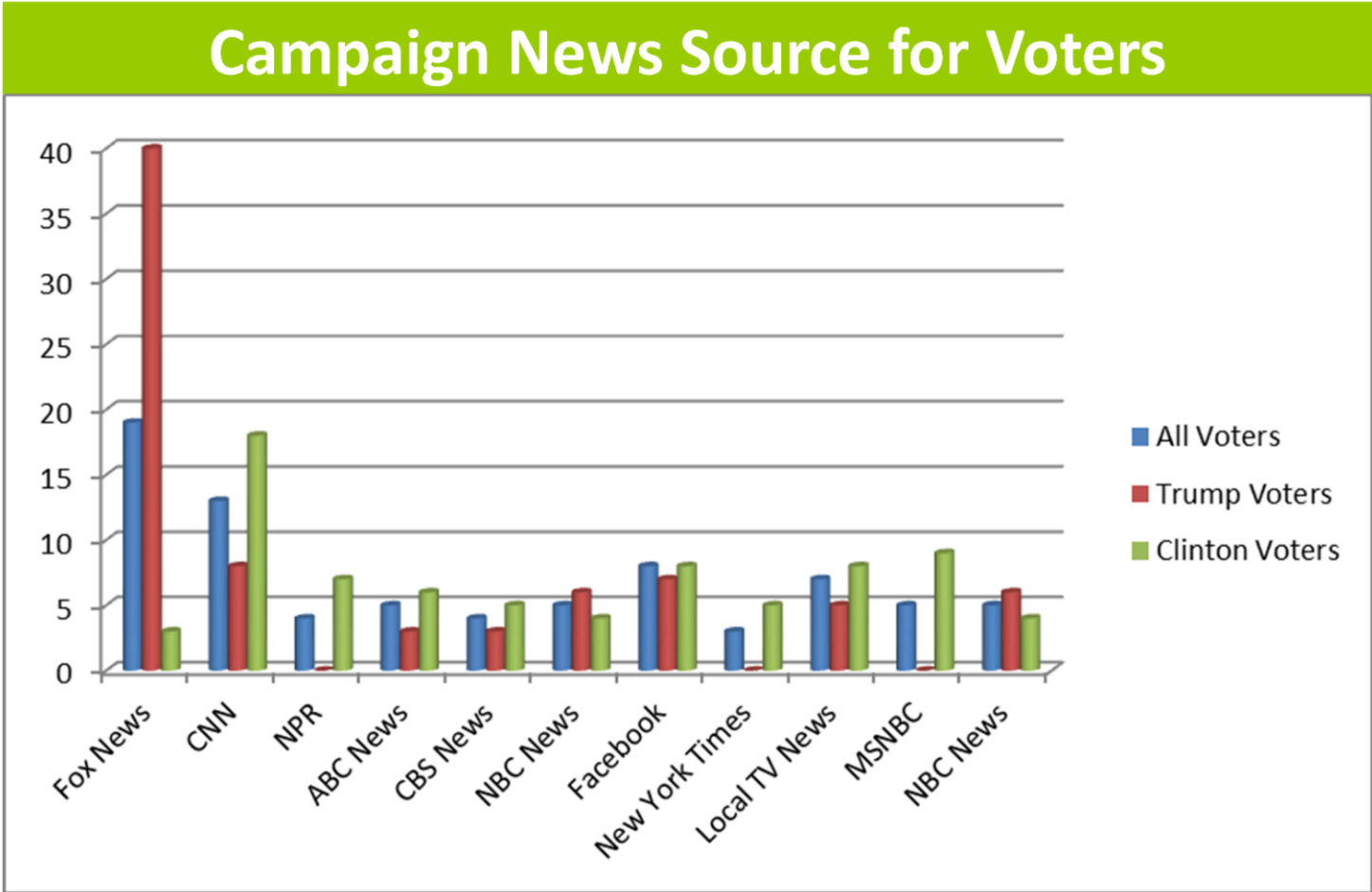


Chart 8.10 Bar Graph on News Sources for Campaign Coverage

Pew Research Center, Survey conducted Nov. 29-Dec. 12, 2016, “Trump, Clinton Voters Divided in Their Main Source for Election News”

Coverage Effects on Governance and Campaigns

The media’s coverage of campaigns and government does affect the way government operates and the success of candidates. In 1972, for instance, the McGovern-Fraser reforms created a voter-controlled

primary system, so party leaders no longer pick the presidential candidates. Now the media are kingmakers and play a strong role in influencing who will become the Democratic and Republican nominees in presidential elections. They can discuss the candidates' messages, vet their credentials, carry sound bites of their speeches, and conduct interviews. The candidates with the most media coverage build momentum and do well in the first few primaries and caucuses. This, in turn, leads to more media coverage, more momentum, and eventually a winning candidate. Thus, candidates need the media.

In the 1980s, campaigns learned that tight control on candidate information created more favorable media coverage. Candidates began using an issue-of-the-day strategy, providing quotes and material on only one topic each day. This strategy limited what journalists could cover because they had only limited quotes and sound bites to use in their reports. Somewhat tired of the information games being played by politicians, journalists sought ways to take back control of the news cycles.^[16]

Campaign coverage now focuses on the spectacle of the season, the campaign horse race, rather than providing information about candidate views. Colorful personalities, strange comments, lapses of memory, and embarrassing revelations are more likely to get airtime than the candidates' issue positions. Supporting the argument that news coverage is driven by audience appeal, were those who said citizens wanted to see updates on the race and electoral drama rather than issue positions or substantive reporting.^[17] This type of coverage has been dubbed, **horse race journalism**, and is also the result of some who argued that newspapers and news programs were limiting the space they allot to discussion of the campaigns, which is of high viewer and reader interest.^[18] All these factors have led to the shallow press coverage we see today especially with the focus on personality and conflict rather than substantive issues. There can be no doubt that horse race journalism is the dominant approach to media coverage of current presidential campaigns. Television news discusses the strategies and blunders of the election with colorful examples, and newspapers often focus on the polls.

Due in part to the lack of substantive media coverage, campaigns increasingly use social media to relay their message. Candidates can create their own sites and pages and try to spread news through supporters to the undecided. Yet, on social media, candidates still need to combat negativity, from both the opposition and supporters.

In an analysis of the 2012 election, Pew Research found that more than half of the stories and coverage focused on campaign strategy, less than ten percent on domestic issues positions and public records about candidates, with almost no coverage of foreign policy positions. With the focus on campaign strategy, the press coverage we see today has been sometimes dubbed pack journalism because journalists follow one another rather than digging for their own stories or confirming facts.

The media's discussion of campaigns has also grown negative. Although biased campaign coverage dates back to the period of the partisan press, the increase in the number of cable news stations has made the problem more visible.

During the 2012 campaign, seventy-one of the seventy-four MSNBC stories about Mitt Romney were highly negative, while FOXNews' coverage of Obama had forty-six of fifty-two stories with negative

information. ABC, CBS, and NBC were somewhat more balanced, yet the overall coverage of both candidates tended to be negative.^[19]

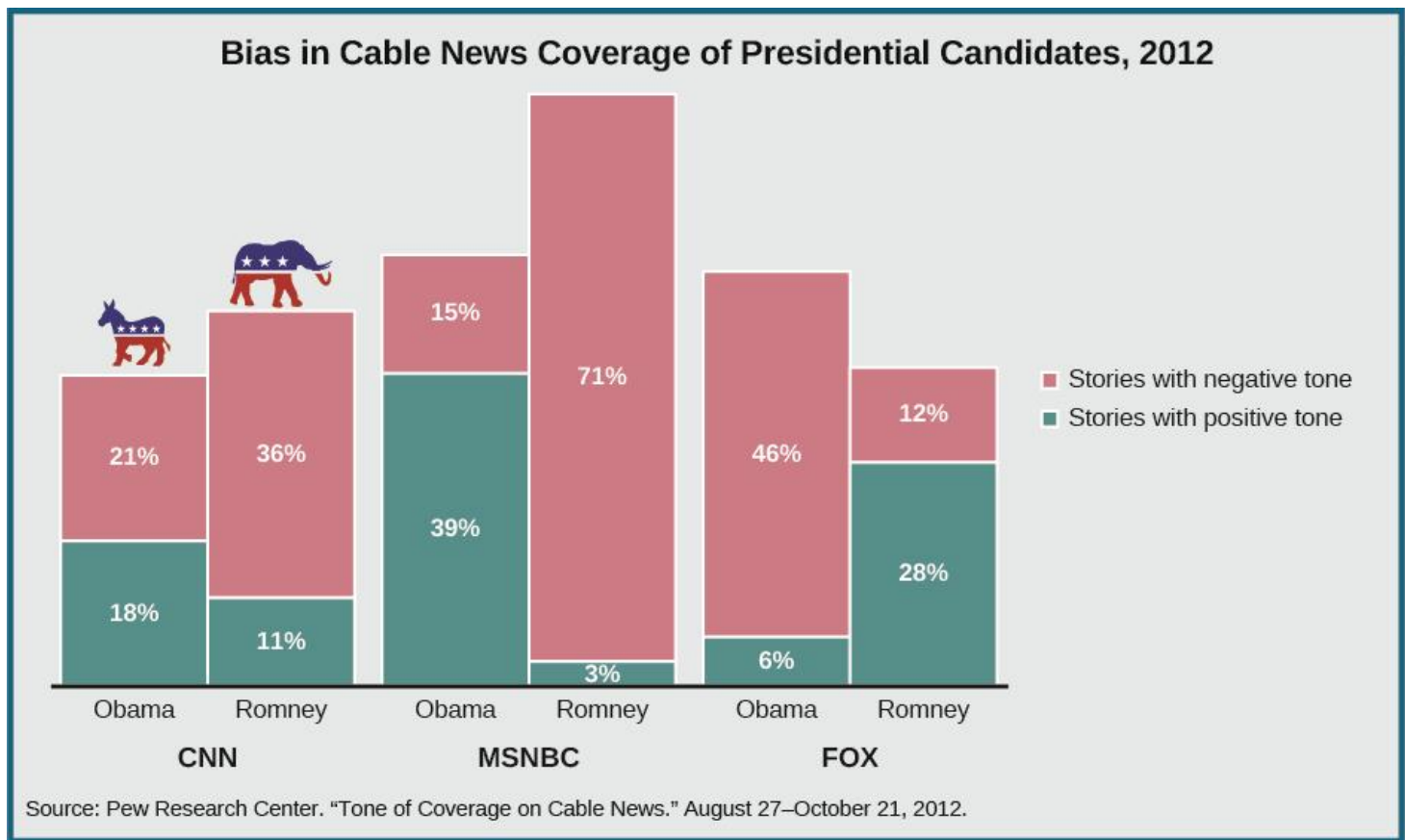


Chart 8.11 Graph on Bias in Cable News

Due in part to the lack of substantive issue-oriented media coverage, campaigns increasingly use social media to relay their message.

As the chart below indicates, all voters relied on news websites and social media second only to television. Candidates can also create their own sites and pages and try to spread news through supporters to the undecided. Yet, on social media, candidates still need to combat negativity from opposition supporters. In the 2016 election cycle, both party nominees heavily used social media. Donald Trump's scores of tweets became very prominent as he tweeted during Clinton's convention acceptance speech and sometimes at all hours of the night. Clinton also used Twitter, but less so than Trump.

The Presidency and the Media

Once candidates are in office, the chore of governing begins, with the added weight of media attention.

Historically, if presidents were unhappy with their press coverage, they used personal and professional means to change its tone. Cabinet secretaries and other appointees also talk with the press, sometimes making for conflicting messages. The creation of the position of press secretary and the White House

Office of Communications both stemmed from the need to send a cohesive message from the executive branch. Currently, the White House controls the information coming from the executive branch through the Office of Communications and decides who will meet with the press and what information will be given.

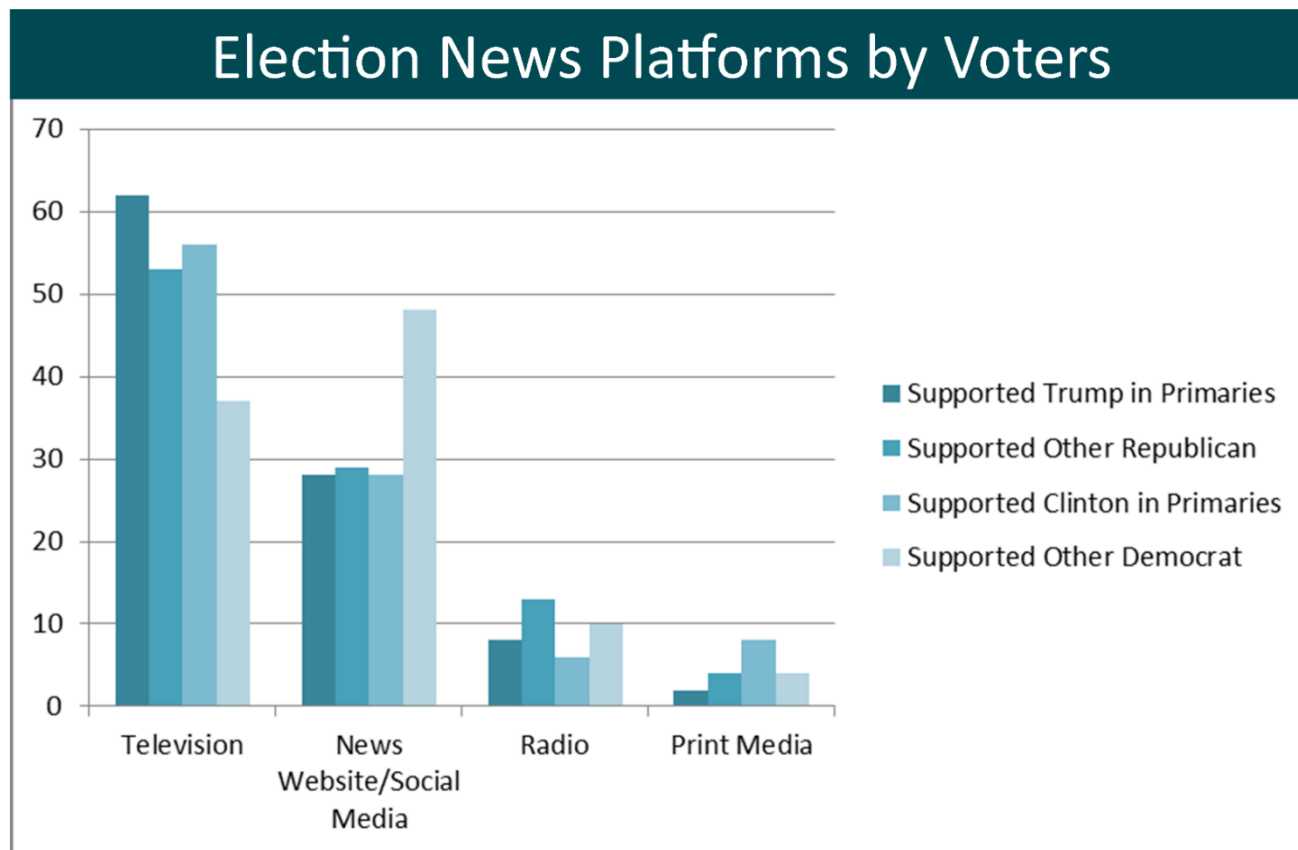


Chart 8.12 Bar Graph on Election News Platforms by Voters (Credit: Pew Research Center, Primary support was asked April 5-May 2, 2016; survey conducted Nov. 29-Dec. 12, 2016, "Trump, Clinton Voters Divided in Their Main Source for Election News")

In the past, the presidential press secretary ran the daily press briefing and provided access to a limited number of news media members to ask direct questions about administration policy. Daily press briefings under the Trump Administration have had sporadic cycles of regular daily briefings to periods of no briefings.

At times it appeared President Trump preferred to use social media, particularly Twitter, for messaging purposes. He did not work to cultivate relationships with media but rather criticized media as untrustworthy, which led to critical coverage of the president across all but a few press outlets.

The Biden Administration reinstated regular daily briefings with Jen Psaki as press secretary, and this continues with Karine Jean-Pierre.

While many hundred reporters hold White House credentials, the briefing room holds about 49 seats.^[20] The seats are occupied overwhelmingly by traditional or mainstream media toward the front, internet based media behind, and all arrangements typically set by the press secretary.^[21] Stories about the president often examine personality, or the president's ability to lead the country, deal with Congress, or respond to national and international events.



Image 8.8 Photo of White House Press Secretary

Photo of White House Press Secretary, Karine Jean-Pierre

(Credit: Wikimedia Commons: Cameron Smith
Credit: White House)

They are less likely to cover the president's policies or agendas without a lot of effort on the president's behalf.^[22]

When Obama first entered office in 2009, journalists focused on his battles with Congress, critiquing his leadership style and inability to work with Representative Nancy Pelosi, then Speaker of the House. To gain attention for his policies, specifically the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), Obama began traveling the United States to draw the media away from Congress and encourage discussion of his economic stimulus package. Once the ARRA had been passed, Obama began travelling again, speaking locally about why the country needed the Affordable Care Act and guiding media coverage to promote support for the act.^[23] This campaign style promotion of the presidential agenda has also been adopted by President Trump.

Congress and the Media

Individual congressional representatives have a harder time attracting media attention for their policies.

House and Senate members who use the media well, either to help their party or to show expertise in an area, may increase their power within Congress, which helps them bargain for fellow legislators' votes. Senators and high-ranking House members, frequently key committee chairs, may also be invited to appear on cable news programs as guests, where they may gain some media support for their policies. Yet, overall, because there are so many members of Congress, and therefore so many agendas, it is harder for individual representatives to draw media coverage.^[24]

Considerable media attention is focused on the party leaders, such as the Speaker of the House, the Senate Majority Leader, and minority leaders of the House and Senate. However, centering on these individuals can lead the public to a misunderstanding of the role of the entire body to develop policy and on development of legislation through the decentralized committee system. Congressional Party leaders are not the sole policy makers for the legislature although they receive major media focus in conflicts between the President and Congress.

It is less clear, however, whether media coverage of an issue leads Congress to make policy, or whether congressional policymaking leads the media to cover policy.

Later studies of the media's effect on both the president and Congress report that the media has a stronger agenda-setting effect on the president than on Congress. What the media choose to cover affects what the president thinks is important to voters, and these issues were often of national importance. The media's effect on Congress was limited, however, and mostly extended to local issues like education or child and elder abuse.^[25] If the media are discussing a topic, chances are a member of Congress has already submitted a relevant bill, and it is waiting in committee.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How might framing affect the way a reader or viewer thinks about an issue?

[Show Answer](#)

Creates a context about an issue which increases the perceived importance or relevance; may involve cropping of photos or editing of video

2. How might priming affect the way a reader or viewer thinks about an issue?

[Show Answer](#)

Predisposes the individual to adopt a particular point of view, biasing the opinion through visual or emotional appeal; language used, editing, etc.

3. What do we mean by partisan selective exposure of the media?

[Show Answer](#)

Where the partisan or ideological orientation of viewers, listeners, or readers determines the choices made on news information sources

4. Have changes in media formats created a more accurate, less biased media?

[Show Answer](#)

open for debate

TERMS TO REMEMBER

Cultivation theory—the idea that media affect a citizen's worldview through the information presented influencing public opinion formation

framing—giving a news story a specific context or background (sometimes with word choice, photo cropping, or video editing processes) so the reader understands its importance or relevance

horse race journalism—news reporting on the race and electoral drama rather than issue positions or substantive reporting

hypodermic theory—idea that information is placed in a citizen's brain by the media and accepted

pack journalism—journalists follow one another rather than digging for their own stories

partisan selective exposure—where the partisan or ideological orientation of viewers, listeners, or readers determines the choices made on news information sources

priming—the process of predisposing readers or viewers to think a particular way

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8.4 Media: How are they regulated?



Image 8.9 Seal of the Federal Communications Commission

(Credit: Federal Communications Commission at https://transition.fcc.gov/files/logos/fcc-seal_rgb-on-white-large.jpg)

Learning Objectives

- Identify circumstances in which the freedom of the press is not absolute.
- Compare the ways in which the government oversees and influences media programming.

Chart 8.13 Learning Objectives on Freedom of the Press

Media and the First Amendment

The U.S. *Constitution* was written in secrecy. Journalists were neither invited to watch the drafting, nor did the framers talk to the press about their disagreements and decisions. Once it was finished, however, the *Constitution* was released to the public and almost all newspapers printed it. Newspaper editors also published commentary and opinion about the new document and the form of government it proposed. The eventual printing of *The Federalist Papers*, and the lesser-known *Anti-Federalist Papers*, fueled the argument that the press was vital to American democracy. It was also clear the press had the ability to affect public opinion and therefore public policy.^[1]

Consider the Original: First Amendment

The approval of the First Amendment, as a part of the Bill of Rights, demonstrated the framers' belief that a free and vital press was important enough to protect. It said:

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."

Figure 2 Chart 8.14 Text of First Amendment

This amendment serves as the basis for the political freedoms of the United States, and freedom of the press plays a strong role in keeping our governmental system healthy. Without it, the press would not be free to alert citizens to government abuses and corruption.



Image 8.14 Drawing of Court Scene Involving Libel Against Government

In defending John Peter Zenger against charges of libel against colonial governor William Cosby, Andrew Hamilton argued that a statement is not libelous if it can be proved. (Credit: modification of work by the Library of Congress)

The media act as informants and messengers, providing the means for citizens to become informed and serving as a venue for citizens to announce plans to assemble and protest actions by their government. Like the other First Amendment liberties, freedom of the press is not absolute. The media have limitations on their freedom to publish and broadcast.

Defamation of Character: Private Citizens Versus Public Figures

Freedom of speech and press by the media can conflict with a citizen's right not to be subject to false statements in the media that would defame a person's character. That is, the media do not have a general right under the principle of protected free press or speech to commit **slander** (to speak false information with an intent to harm a person) or **libel** (the printing of false information with intent to harm a person or entity).^[2] Yet, on a weekly basis, media outlets publish stories that are negative and harmful of public figures. They do this and yet they are not often sued.

The key reason for a lack of litigation is that the average citizen must be treated differently by the media than individuals who are public figures or government officials. The government has different standards depending on whether the individual is a private or public figure.^[3]

Libel and **slander** occur only in cases where false information is presented as fact. When editors or columnists write opinions, they are protected from many of the libel and slander provisions because they are not claiming their statements are facts. Second, it is up to the defamed individual or company to bring a lawsuit against the media outlet, and the courts have different standards depending on whether the claimant is a private or public figure. A public figure must show that the publisher or broadcaster acted with a "reckless disregard" when submitting information as truth or that the author's intent was malicious. This test goes back to the *New York Times v. Sullivan* (1964) case, in which a police commissioner in Alabama sued over inaccurate statements in a newspaper advertisement.^[4] Because the commissioner was a public figure, the U.S. Supreme Court applied a stringent test of malice to determine whether the advertisement was libel; the court deemed it was not. A private individual must make one of the above arguments or argue that the author was negligent in not making sure the information was accurate before publishing it. For this reason, newspapers and magazines are less likely to stray from hard facts when covering private individuals, yet they can be willing to stretch the facts when writing about politicians, celebrities, or public figures. But even stretching the truth can be costly for a publisher.

Classified Material

The media have only a limited right to publish material the government says is classified. If a newspaper or media outlet obtains classified material, or if a journalist is witness to information that is classified, the government may request certain material be redacted or removed from the article.

The line between the people's right to know and national security is not always clear. In 1971, the Supreme Court heard the Pentagon Papers case, in which the U.S. government sued the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* to stop the release of information from a classified study of the Vietnam War. The Supreme Court ruled that while the government can impose **prior restraint** on the media, meaning the government can prevent the publication of information, that right is very limited. The court gave the newspapers the right to publish much of the study, but revelation of troop movements and the names of undercover operatives are some of the few approved reasons for which the government can stop publication or reporting. According to CNN's Chris Plante, in an article titled "Military Kicks Geraldo Out of Iraq" (31 March 2003), Plante describes an incident during the second Persian Gulf War, when FOXNEWS reporter Geraldo Rivera convinced the military to embed him with a U.S. Army unit in Iraq, to provide live coverage of its day-to-day activities. During one of the reports, Rivera had his camera operator record him drawing a map in the sand, showing where his combat unit was, using Baghdad as a reference point. Rivera then discussed where the unit would go next. Rivera was immediately removed from the unit and escorted from Iraq. The military exercised its right to maintain secrecy over troop movements, stating that Rivera's reporting had given away troop locations and compromised the safety of the unit. Rivera's future transmissions and reporting were censored until he was away from the unit.

Media and FCC Regulations

The liberties enjoyed by newspapers are overseen by the U.S. court system, while television and radio broadcasters are monitored by both the courts and a government regulatory commission.

The Communications Act of 1934 created a powerful entity to monitor the airwaves—a seven-member Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to oversee both radio and telephone communication. The FCC, which now has only five members, requires radio stations to apply for licenses, granted only if stations follow rules about political advertising, providing a public forum for discussion, and serving local and minority communities. With the advent of television, the FCC was given the same authority to license and monitor television stations. The FCC now also enforces ownership limits to avoid monopolies, and it censors materials deemed inappropriate. It has no jurisdiction over print media, mainly because print media are purchased and not broadcast.



Concerned about something you heard or viewed? Would you like to file a complaint about an obscene radio program or place your phone number on the Do Not Call list? The **FCC** oversees each of these.

To maintain a license, stations are required to meet several criteria. The **equal-time rule**, for instance, states that registered candidates running for office must be given equal opportunities for airtime and advertisements at non-cable television and radio stations beginning forty-five days before a primary election and sixty days before a general election. Should WBNS in Columbus, Ohio, agree to sell Senator Marco Rubio thirty seconds of airtime for a presidential campaign commercial, the station must also sell all other candidates in that race thirty seconds of airtime at the same price. This rate cannot be more than the station charges favored commercial advertisers that run ads of the same class and during the same time period.^[5]

More importantly, should Fox5 in Atlanta give Bernie Sanders five minutes of free airtime for an infomercial, the station must honor requests from all other candidates in the race for five minutes of free equal air time or a complaint may be filed with the FCC.^[6] In 2015, Donald Trump, when he was a candidate running for the presidential Republican nomination, appeared on *Saturday Night Live*. Other Republican candidates made equal time requests, and NBC agreed to give each candidate twelve minutes and five seconds of air time on a Friday and Saturday night, as well as during a later episode of *Saturday Night Live*.^[7]

The FCC does waive the **equal-time rule** if the coverage is purely news. If a newscaster is covering a political rally and can secure a short interview with a candidate, equal time does not apply. Likewise, if a news program creates a short documentary on the problem of immigration reform and chooses to include clips from only one or two candidates, the rule does not apply.^[8]

But the rule may include shows that are not news. For this reason, some stations will not show a movie or television program if a candidate appears in it. In 2003, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Gary Coleman, both actors, became candidates in California's gubernatorial recall election. Television stations did not run Coleman's sitcom *Diff'rent Strokes* or Schwarzenegger's movies, because they would have been subject to the equal time provision. With 135 candidates on the official ballot, stations would have been hard-pressed to offer thirty-minute and two-hour time slots to all.^[9]

Even the broadcasting of the president's State of the Union speech can trigger the equal-time provisions. Opposing parties in Congress now use their time immediately following the State of the Union to offer an official rebuttal to the president's proposals.^[10]

The now abandoned **fairness doctrine** was instituted in 1949 and required licensed stations to cover controversial issues in a balanced manner by providing listeners with information about all perspectives on any controversial issue. If one candidate, cause, or supporter was given an opportunity to reach the viewers or listeners, the other side was to be given a chance to present its side as well. The fairness doctrine ended in the 1980s, after a succession of court cases led to its repeal by the FCC in 1987, with stations and critics arguing the doctrine limited debate of controversial topics and placed the government in the role of editor.^[11]

The FCC also maintains indecency regulations over television, radio, and other broadcasters, which limit indecent material and keep the public airwaves free of obscene material.^[12]

The Supreme Court determined that the presence of children in the audience trumped the right of broadcasters to air obscene and profane programming. However, broadcasters can show indecent programming or air profane language between the hours of 10 p.m. and 6 a.m.^[13] The FCC mainly relies on citizens and consumers to file complaints about violations of equal time and indecency rules.

What constitutes a violation is not always clear for citizens wishing to complain, nor is it clear what will lead to a fine or license revocation. In October 2014, parent advocacy groups and consumers filed complaints and called for the FCC to fine ABC for running a sexually charged opening scene in the drama *Scandal* immediately after *It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown*—without an ad or the cartoon's credits to act as a buffer between the very different types of programming.^[14] The FCC did not fine ABC.

The Telecommunications Act of 1996 brought significant changes to the radio and television industries. It dropped the limit on the number of radio stations (forty) and television stations (twelve) a single company could own. It also allowed networks to purchase large numbers of cable stations. It reduced competition and increased the number of conglomerates. Some critics, such as Common Cause, argue that the act also raised cable prices and made it easier for companies to neglect their public interest obligations.^[15] The act also changed the role of the FCC from regulator to monitor. The Commission oversees the purchase of stations to avoid media monopolies and adjudicates consumer complaints against radio, television, and telephone companies.

Media and Transparency

The press has had some assistance in performing its muckraking duty. Laws that mandate federal and many state government proceedings and meeting documents be made available to the public are called **sunshine laws**. Proponents believe that open disagreements allow democracy to flourish and darkness allows corruption to occur. Opponents argue that some documents and policies are sensitive, and that the sunshine laws can inhibit policymaking.

While some documents may be classified due to national or state security, governments are encouraged to limit the over-classification of documents. The primary legal example for sunshine laws is the **Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)**, passed in 1966 and signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson. The act requires the executive branch of the U.S. government to provide information requested by citizens and was intended to increase openness in the executive branch, which had been criticized for hiding information. Citizens wishing to obtain information may request documents from the appropriate agencies, and agencies may charge fees if the collection and copying of the requested documentation requires time and labor.^[16]

FOIA also identifies data that does not need to be disclosed, such as human resource and medical records, national defense records, and material provided by confidential sources, to name a few.^[17] Not all presidents have embraced this openness, however. President Ronald Reagan, in 1981, exempted the CIA and FBI from FOIA requests.^[18]

Information requests have increased significantly in recent years, with U.S. agencies receiving over 700,000 requests in 2014, many directed to the Departments of State and Defense, thus creating a backlog.^[19]



Want to request a government document but unsure where to start? If the agency is a part of the U.S. government, the [Freedom of Information Act](#) portal will help you out.

Few people file requests for information because most assume the media will find and report on important problems. And many people, including the press, assume the government, including the White House, sufficiently answers questions and provide information about government actions and policies. This expectation is not new.

The line between journalists' expectation of openness and the government's willingness to be open has continued to be a point of contention. Some administrations use the media to increase public support during times of war, as Woodrow Wilson did in World War I. Other presidents limit the media in order to limit dissent. In 1990, during the first Persian Gulf War, journalists received all publication material from the military in a prepackaged and staged manner. Access to Dover, the air force base that receives coffins of U.S. soldiers who die overseas, was closed. Journalists accused George H. W. Bush's administration of limiting access and forcing them to produce bad pieces. The White House believed it controlled the message.^[20] The ban was later lifted.

In his 2008 presidential run, Barack Obama promised to run a transparent White House.^[21] Yet once in office, he found that transparency makes it difficult to get work done, and so he limited access and questions. In his first year in office, George W. Bush, who was criticized by Obama as having a closed government, gave 147 question-and-answer sessions with journalists, while Obama gave only 46. Even Helen Thomas, a long-time liberal White House press correspondent, said the Obama administration tried to control both information and journalists.^[22]

Because White House limitations on the press are not unusual, many journalists rely on confidential sources. In 1972, under the cloak of anonymity, the associate director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Mark Felt, became a news source for Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, political reporters at the *Washington Post*. Felt provided information about several potential stories and was Woodward's main source for information about President Richard Nixon's involvement in a series of illegal activities, including the break-in at Democratic Party headquarters in Washington's Watergate office complex. The information eventually led to Nixon's resignation and the indictment of sixty-nine people in his administration. Felt was nicknamed "Deep Throat," and the journalists kept his identity secret until 2005.^[23]

The practice of granting anonymity to sources is sometimes referred to as reporter's privilege. Fueled by the First Amendment's protection of the press, journalists have long offered to keep sources confidential to protect them from government prosecution. Reporter's privilege has increased the number of instances in which whistleblowers and government employees have given journalists tips or documents to prompt investigation into questionable government practices.

Edward Snowden's 2013 leak to the press regarding the U.S. government's massive internal surveillance and tapping program was one such case. In 1972, however, the Supreme Court determined that journalists are not exempt from subpoenas and that courts could force testimony to name a confidential source.

Journalists who conceal a source and thereby protect him or her from being properly tried for a crime may spend time in jail for contempt of court. In the case of *Branzburg v. Hayes* (1972), three journalists were placed in contempt of court for refusing to divulge sources.^[24] The journalists appealed to the Supreme Court. In a 5–4 decision, the justices determined that freedom of the press did not extend to the confidentiality of sources. A concurring opinion did state that the case should be seen as a limited ruling, however. If the government needed to know a source due to a criminal trial, it could pursue the name of that source.^[25]

More recently, the Supreme Court refused to hear an appeal from *New York Times* journalist James Risen, who was subpoenaed and ordered to name a confidential source that had provided details about a U.S. government mission designed to harm Iran's nuclear arms program. Risen was finally released from the subpoena, but the battle took seven years.^[26] Overall, the transparency of the government is affected more by the executive currently holding office than by the First Amendment.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Why is it a potential problem that the equal-time rule does not apply to candidates' supporters?

[Show Answer](#)

open for debate

2. Under what circumstances might a journalist be compelled to give up a source?

[Show Answer](#)

open for debate

3. What regulations limit what media can do?

[Show Answer](#)

The Federal Communications Commission establishes some licensing regulation for broadcast media and some content standards, although this regulation does not impact newspapers or cable television or the internet.

TERMS TO REMEMBER

equal-time rule—an FCC policy that all candidates running for office must be given the same radio and television airtime opportunities

fairness doctrine—a 1949 Federal Communications Commission (FCC) policy, now defunct, that required holders of broadcast licenses to cover controversial issues in a balanced manner

Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)—a federal statute that requires public agencies to provide certain types of information requested by citizens

indecent regulations—laws that limit indecent and obscene material on public airwaves

libel—printed information about a person or organization that is not true and harms the reputation of the person or organization

prior restraint—a government action that stops someone from doing something before they are able to do it (e.g., forbidding someone to publish a book he or she plans to release)

reporter's privilege—the right of a journalist to keep a source confidential

slander—spoken information about a person or organization that is not true and harms the reputation of the person or organization

sunshine laws—laws that require government documents and proceedings to be made public

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