

Media Power and Government Control

In December 2002, Sen. Trent Lott was on the verge of becoming majority leader of the U.S. Senate. News stories killed that dream. Lott's fall from political grace began with a story reported by a young reporter for ABC News, Ed O'Keefe. O'Keefe took offense at a toast that Lott made during a one-hundredth-birthday celebration for South Carolina's senator and onetime presidential candidate Strom Thurmond. O'Keefe considered Lott's toast high praise for the segregationist policies that Thurmond had embraced earlier in his career. ABC, after initially slighting the story, featured it when it exploded on the Web. When the embarrassing tale became widely known, Lott's colleagues in the Senate felt that they could not place him into this powerful position. Fear of further bad publicity led to his early retirement from the Senate in December 2007. News stories had undermined his career.¹

News stories, which turned out to be false, also brought a major airline company—United Airlines—to the brink of bankruptcy, just hours after they were widely publicized on September 8, 2008. The stories reported that the airline had filed for bankruptcy, at a time when the economy was declining and nervous investors were keeping close watch on stock market reports. Investors panicked and dumped United Airlines stock, along with the stocks of other airlines. United Airlines stock, which had been worth about \$12 a share, plunged to \$3 in less than one hour, triggering a halt in trading. Airline stock prices recovered quickly, but not completely, when it was discovered that the bankruptcy story was based on events that had occurred six years earlier. Somehow, a story reporting a 2002 event had mistakenly resurfaced with a 2008 dateline.² Though false, it carried a devastating economic punch.

POLITICAL IMPORTANCE OF MASS MEDIA

The Trent Lott and United Airlines stories illustrate how mass media reports, in combination with other political factors, shape the views of political leaders and citizens about public policies and public officials.³ News stories take millions of Americans, in all walks of life, to the political and military battlefields of the world. They give them ringside seats for presidential inaugurations or basketball championships. They allow the public to share political experiences,

such as watching political debates or congressional investigations. These experiences then undergird public opinions and political actions.⁴

Print, audio, and audiovisual media often serve as attitude and behavior models. The images that media create suggest which views and behaviors are acceptable and even praiseworthy and which are outside the mainstream. Audiences can learn how to conduct themselves at home and at work, how to cope with crises, and how to evaluate social institutions such as the medical profession or grocery chains. The mass media also are powerful guardians of proper political behavior because Americans believe that the press should inform them about government wrongdoing. Media stories indicate what different groups deem important or unimportant, what conforms to prevailing standards of justice and morality, and how events are related to each other. In the process the media set forth cultural values that their audiences are likely to accept in whole or in part as typical of U.S. society. The media thus help to integrate and homogenize our society.

Media images are especially potent when they involve aspects of life that people experience only through the media. The personal and professional conduct of politicians, political events beyond hometown boundaries, frenzied trading at stock exchanges, medical breakthroughs, or corrupt corporate dealings are not generally experienced firsthand. Rather, popular perceptions of these aspects of life take shape largely in response to news and fictional stories in media. Like caricatures, media stories often create skewed impressions because they cannot report most stories in detail or full context. For example, thanks to a heavy focus on crime news and fiction stories, television exaggerates the likelihood of an individual becoming a victim of crime. Viewers therefore fear crime excessively, especially if they watch a lot of television.⁵

Attention to the mass media is all-pervasive among twenty-first-century Americans. The average high school graduate today has spent more time watching televised broadcasts than in school, particularly during his or her preschool and elementary school days. Even in school, media are the basis for much learning about current events. An average adult in the United States spends nearly half of her or his leisure time watching television, listening to the radio, reading newspapers and magazines, or surfing the Web. Averaged over an entire week, this amounts to more than seven hours of exposure per day to some form of mass media news or entertainment. Television, relayed over the air, via cable, through the Internet, or through a videotape recorder, occupies three-fourths of this time. Despite considerable dissatisfaction with the quality of television programs in all of these modalities, television remains the primary source of news and entertainment for the average American.⁶

Fifty-two percent of people responding to a national survey in late spring 2008 said that they had watched local television news the day before. Additionally, 34 percent claimed to have read a daily newspaper the day before, and 35 percent said that they had paid attention to radio news.⁷ The ability to attract such vast audiences of ordinary people, as well as political elites, is a major ingredient in the power of the mass media and makes them extraordinarily important for the

TABLE 1-1 News Consumption Patterns, 2004 and 2008 (in percentages)

<i>Medium</i>	<i>2004</i>	<i>2008</i>	<i>Change</i>
Local TV news	59	52	-7
Newspapers "read yesterday"	42	34	-8
Radio news "listened yesterday"	40	35	-5
Nightly network news	34	29	-5
Online news "three or more days"	29	37	+8
Fox News	25	23	-2
CNN	22	24	+2
Network morning shows	22	22	0
National Public Radio	16	11	-5
<i>NewsHour with Jim Lehrer</i>	5	5	0
C-SPAN	5	4	-1

Source: Adapted from the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "Audience Segments in a Changing News Environment," August 17, 2008, <http://people-press.org>.

Note: Telephone interviews conducted between April 30 and June 1, 2008, among a nationwide sample of 3,615 adults.

individuals and groups whose stories and causes are publicized. Although their percentages have been shrinking, as Table 1-1 shows, the traditional media retain their dominance, and the audiences for political Web sites are comparatively small. A 2007 survey reported that the total volume of traffic to political Web sites was "about the same as the typical audience for a single broadcast of *ABC World News Tonight*."⁸ Moreover, most of the news content aired on Web sites is drawn from mainstream media reports.

Politically relevant information is often conveyed through stories that are not concerned explicitly with politics. In fact, because most people are exposed far more to nonpolitical information, make-believe media, such as movies and entertainment television, have become major suppliers of political images. In 2008, for example, Comedy Central's *Daily Show* provided ample and steady coverage of the presidential election campaign in its "Indecision 2008" commentaries. NBC's *Saturday Night Live* election comedy sketches reached as many as 14 million viewers, more than most competing prime-time offerings. Young viewers in particular regularly cite *Late Show* with David Letterman and the *Tonight Show* with Jay Leno as their main sources of political information.⁹

Such entertainment shows portray social institutions, such as the police or the schools, in ways that either convey esteem or heap scorn. These shows also express social judgments about various types of people. For instance, television

It has become fashionable to talk about news media behavior and effects using the singular, as if the media were one giant, undifferentiated institution. Researchers strengthen that impression because they commonly generalize about media behavior and effects based on data drawn from a single news source—most often the *New York Times*. The resulting caricature hides the immense richness of the news media in topics and framing, in presentation forms and styles, and in the unique social and political environments that they reflect. Yes, indeed, "media" should be treated as a plural noun!

How does one medium differ from the next? Communications scholar Michael Schudson answers that question in the opening essay of a massive volume about the role of the news media in the contemporary United States. Schudson warns, "It is a mistake to identify American journalism exclusively with the dominant mainstream-television network news and high circulation metropolitan daily newspapers. This error is compounded . . . if attention is paid exclusively to leading hard-news reporting, and features, editorials, news analysis, opinion columns, and other elements of the journalistic mix are ignored."¹

Schudson identifies four distinct types of journalism, which are often combined to please various audiences. There is traditional mainstream journalism, often called "hard" news and there is "soft news" tabloid journalism. Both differ from advocacy journalism, which is devoted to pleading particular causes, and from entertainment journalism, which may offer news but only as a by-product. The stories produced in these styles also bear the imprint of the various types of venues that present them: newspapers and magazines of all shapes and sizes, radio and television broadcast stations, and Internet news sites and weblogs. These diverse venues brim with a veritable smorgasbord of news stories, told from different perspectives and framed to carry unique shades of meanings effectively.

Their impact varies, depending on audience characteristics. U.S. scholars tend to think that "hard" print news is and should be king, but both claims are debatable. Compared to print news, audiovisual news captures much bigger audiences, and evidence is growing that it may also be the public's most effective teacher. Some messages are primarily important because they reach huge audiences; others attract comparatively tiny ones but are enormously influential nonetheless because some audience members have access to the country's networks of power.

Finally, in the global world in which news now circulates, it is unduly parochial to think of U.S. media performing inside a national cocoon. "Media" is a plural noun in the truest sense because news media now have a global reach. Like the biblical tower of Babylon, they carry a multiplicity of voices, each reflecting different environments and perspectives. Fortunately, unlike biblical times, today the discordant voices, besides being heard, can be translated and considered. How they will be construed then becomes the paramount question.

1. Michael Schudson, "Orientations: The Press and Democracy in Time and Space," in *The Press*, ed. Geneva Overholser and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, 1–3 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

in the past often depicted African Americans and women as politically naive and having limited abilities. This type of coverage conveys messages that audiences, including the misrepresented groups, may accept at face value, even when the portrayals distort real-world conditions. Audience members may also think that social conditions and judgments shown on television are widely accepted and therefore socially sanctioned.¹⁰

Not only are the media the chief source of most Americans' views of the world, but they also provide the fastest way to disperse information throughout society. Major political news broadcasts by twenty-four-hour services such as CNN or Fox News spread breaking stories throughout the country in minutes. People hear the stories directly from radio or television, secondhand from "new" media on the Internet, or from other people.

All of the mass media are politically important because of their potential to reach large audiences. However, the influence of each medium varies depending on its characteristics, the nature and quantity of the political messages it carries, and the size of the audience reached (see Box 1-1 for more on the various types of media and their audiences). Print media, including sites on the Internet that feature text, generally supply the largest quantities of factual political information and analysis. They need readers who are literate at appropriate levels. Electronic media, especially television broadcasts, provide a greater sense of reality, which explains why audiences find electronic media more credible than print media. Moreover, large segments of the U.S. population have limited reading skills and find it far easier to capture meanings from pictures and spoken language. Electronic media also convey physical images, including body language and facial expressions, much more effectively than print media. They are especially well suited to attract viewers' attention and arouse their emotions.¹¹

FUNCTIONS OF MASS MEDIA

What major societal functions do the mass media perform? Political scientist Harold Lasswell, a pioneer in media studies, mentions three things: surveillance of the world to report ongoing events, interpretation of the meaning of events, and socialization of individuals into their cultural settings.¹² To these three, a fourth function must be added: deliberate manipulation of politics. The manner in which these four functions are performed affects the political fate of individuals, groups, and social organizations, as well as the course of domestic and international politics.

Surveillance

Surveillance involves two major tasks. When it serves the collective needs of the public, it constitutes "public surveillance," and when it serves the needs of individual citizens, we call it "private surveillance." Although private surveillance may lead to political activities, its primary functions are gratifying personal needs and quieting personal anxieties.

Public Surveillance. Newspeople determine what is news—that is, which political happenings will be reported and which will be ignored. Their choices are politically significant because they affect who and what will have a good chance to become the focus for political discussion and action.¹³ News stories may force politicians to respond to situations on which their views would not have been aired otherwise. Without media attention the people and events covered by the news might have less influence on decision makers—or none at all. Conditions that might be tolerated in obscurity can become intolerable in the glare of publicity. Take Senator Lott's toast at Strom Thurmond's birthday party. Without the public airing of an essentially private situation, Lott's political downfall and its repercussions would not have happened. Politicians are keenly aware of the media's agenda-setting power. That is why they try mightily to time and structure events to yield as much favorable publicity as possible and to forestall damaging coverage.

The consequences of media surveillance can be good as well as bad. Misperceptions and scares created by media stories have undermined confidence in good policies and practices, good people, and good products on many occasions. The human and economic costs have been vast. For example, dubious stories that impugned the safety of bioengineered foods caused millions of dollars of losses in the affected industries.

If media stories overemphasize crime and corruption in the inner city, scared residents may move to the suburbs, leaving the inner city deserted and even less safe and deprived of tax revenues. Speculation that international conflicts or economic downturns are in the offing may scare investors and produce fluctuations in domestic and international stock markets and commodity exchanges. Serious economic (and hence political) consequences may ensue.

Fear of publicity can be as powerful a force in shaping action as actual exposure. Politicians and business leaders know what damage an unfavorable story can do and act accordingly, either to avoid or conceal censurable behaviors or to atone for them by public confessions. President Bill Clinton, whose eight-year term was pockmarked with scandals, tried valiantly to hide some of them by forceful denials of allegations. But whenever proof made the charges undeniable, he escaped much public wrath by publicly apologizing for his misbehavior.¹⁴ There are no records to show how effective the threat of publicity has been in deterring presidential misbehavior.

The media can doom people and events to obscurity by inattention as well. When the media have more information than they can transmit, many important stories remain untold. That happens most dramatically when the news becomes focused on a single upheaval, such as a major natural or human-made disaster, an election outcome, or a scandal. The time and space used for the single event usurp the time and space of happenings that otherwise would be reported. The size of "news holes"—the time and space available for reporting the news—is fairly inelastic. Newspeople also ignore important events that do not seem "newsworthy" by accepted journalistic criteria or that fail to catch their attention. Conscious attempts to suppress

information for ideological or political reasons are another, but far less frequent, reason for lack of coverage.

For many years left-wing social critics have faulted mainstream U.S. journalists for using their news selection power to strengthen white middle-class values and disparage socialist viewpoints. These critics claim that the media deliberately perpetuate capitalist exploitation of the masses, in line with the ideological preferences of media owners. Critics also claim that the media have intentionally suppressed the facts about dangerous products, such as alcohol and tobacco, and about the socially harmful activities of large corporations, which may be responsible for water and air pollution or unsafe consumer goods.¹⁵ By the same token, right-wing critics complain that the media give undue attention to enemies of the established social and political order in hopes of undermining it. Each camp cites a long list of stories to support its contentions.¹⁶

Journalists reject these charges. They deny political motives in news selection and defend their choices on the basis of the general criteria of newsworthiness (treated more fully in chapter 4). They, too, can muster evidence from news stories to support their claims. At the heart of controversies over the ideological bias of the media lie two basic questions that cannot be answered conclusively. The first concerns people's motivations. How can one prove what motivates journalists to act in certain ways? Lacking proof, is it fair to ascribe motivations to them in the face of their denials? The second question relates to story effects. To what degree can media stories secure the goals that owners of print and electronic media and news professionals are allegedly seeking? If the desired effects are unattainable, the critics' concerns lack weight.

Besides calling attention to matters of potential public concern, the media also provide cues about the importance of an issue. Important stories are covered prominently—on the front page with big headlines and pictures or as major television or radio features. Less important matters are more likely to be buried in the back pages, be listed at the bottom of a Web page, or have brief exposure on television or radio. However, nearly all coverage, even when it is brief and comparatively inconspicuous, lends an aura of significance to publicized topics. Through the sheer fact of coverage the media can confer status on individuals and organizations. The media “function essentially as agencies of social legitimation—as forces, that is, which reaffirm those ultimate value standards and beliefs, which in turn uphold the social and political status quo.”¹⁷

Television made African American civil rights leaders and their causes household names. Martin Luther King Jr. and Jesse Jackson became national figures in part because television showed them giving speeches and leading marches and protests. In King's case, television captured the riots following his assassination. An individual who wins a hearing on radio or television often becomes an instant celebrity, whether he or she is a political candidate, like 2008 vice presidential contender Sarah Palin, nominated as Republican presidential contender John McCain's running mate; or a social crusader, such as Ralph Nader, whose goals became front-page news; or a convicted mass murderer,

such as John Wayne Gacy, accused of sadistic murders of thirty-three young men in the 1970s. Their unpublicized counterparts remain obscure. Because publicity is crucial for political success, actors on the political scene often deliberately create situations likely to receive media coverage. Daniel Boorstin has labeled events arranged primarily to stimulate media coverage “pseudo-events.”¹⁸ Such events range from news conferences called by public figures even when there is no news to announce to physical assaults on people and property by members of protest groups who want to dramatize grievances. Newspeople who must cover such events may feel manipulated and resentful, but they are loath to allow competing media to scoop them.

When events are exceptionally significant or have become widely known already, or when the story is reported by competing media, the journalism community loses control over the news flow. For example, journalistic standards demand the reporting of news about prominent political leaders and major domestic or international events.¹⁹ Aside from such unavoidable situations, coverage is discretionary for a wide range of people and happenings.

The power of the media to set the agenda for politics is not subject to a system of formal checks and balances as is the power of the U.S. government. Media power does not undergo periodic review through the electoral process. If media emphases or claims are incorrect, remedies are few. Truth-in-advertising laws protect citizens from false advertising of consumer goods but not from false political claims or improper news selection or biases by media personnel. The courts have interpreted restrictions on the news media’s power to choose freely what to report and how to frame it as impairing the constitutional rights to free speech and a free press. Media critic Jay Blumler expresses the dilemma well:

Media power is not supposed to be shared: That’s an infringement of editorial autonomy. It is not supposed to be controlled: That’s censorship. It’s not even supposed to be influenced: That’s news management! But why should media personnel be exempt from Lord Acton’s dictum that all power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely? And if they are not exempt, who exactly is best fitted to guard the press guardians, as it were?²⁰

Private Surveillance. Average citizens may not think much about the broader political impact of the news they read, hear, and watch. They use the media primarily to keep in touch with what they deem personally important. The media are their eyes and ears to the world, their means of surveillance. The media, as Marshall McLuhan, another pioneering media scholar, observed, are “sense extensions” for individuals who cannot directly witness most of the events of interest to them and their communities.²¹ The media tell their audiences about weather, sports, jobs, fashions, economic conditions, social and cultural events, health and science, and the public and private lives of famous people.

The ability to stay informed makes people feel secure, whether or not they remember what they read or hear or see. Even though the news may be bad, at

least people feel that there will be no startling surprises. News reassures us that the political system continues to operate despite constant crises and frequent mistakes. Reassurance is important for peace of mind. But it also tends to encourage political quiescence, because there is no need to act if political leaders seem to be doing their jobs. For good or ill, the public's quiescence helps maintain the political and economic status quo.²²

Other significant private functions that the mass media fulfill for many people are entertainment, companionship, tension relief, and a way to pass the time with minimal physical or mental exertion. The mass media can satisfy these important personal needs conveniently and cheaply. People who otherwise might be frustrated and dissatisfied can participate vicariously in current political happenings, in sports and musical events, in the lives of famous people, and in the lives of families and communities featured in the news.²³

Interpretation

Media not only survey the events of the day and bring them to public and private attention, they also interpret the events' meanings, put them into context, and speculate about their consequences. Most incidents lend themselves to a variety of interpretations, depending on the values and experiences of the interpreter. The kind of interpretation affects the political consequences of media reports. For example, since 1962 the way in which the media interpret the legal and social significance of abortions has changed considerably. Abortion almost universally used to be considered murder. The abortionist was the villain and the pregnant woman was an accomplice in a heinous crime. Now abortion is usually cast into the frame of women's rights to control their bodies and to protect their physical and mental health.

What spawned the switch in media interpretation and eased the change in public attitudes toward abortion was the experience of a beloved television personality. Sherri Finkbine, hostess of *Romper Room*, a popular children's show in the 1960s, had taken thalidomide during her pregnancy before the drug's deforming effects on the unborn were known. Once she learned that she was likely to give birth to a severely malformed baby, she had an abortion in 1962. Instead of reporting the action as murder, as had been the custom, news media throughout the country defended Finkbine's decision to terminate her pregnancy. To steer clear of the negative connotations of the word *abortion*, journalists used a new vocabulary. They talked of "surgery to prevent a malformed baby," of "avoiding the possibility of mothering a drug-deformed child," and of the necessity of inducing a miscarriage to spare a child from loathing "its own image and crying out against those who might have spared it this suffering."²⁴

Numerous circumstances influenced the type of interpretation that the Finkbine story received. In the end, it hinged on journalists' decisions, made independently or in response to pressures, to frame the story in a specific way and to choose informants accordingly. Journalists' inclinations help decide how the news will be framed, which in turn determines its likely impact.

By suggesting the causes and relationships of events, the media may shape opinions without explicitly telling audiences which views seem right or wrong. For example, linking civil strife abroad during the Cold War to left-wing agitators ensured that the U.S. public would view violent protests with considerable alarm. Linking the protests to internal corruption and social oppression would have put the problems into a far less threatening light.

News presentations can predetermine people's conclusions in countless ways.

We [journalists] can attribute any social problem to official policies, the machinations of those who benefit from it, or the pathology of those who suffer from it. We can trace it back to class or racial inequalities, to ideologies such as nationalism or patriotism, or to resistance to the regime. We can root the problem in God, in its historic genesis, in the accidental or systematic conjuncture of events, in rationality, in irrationality, or in a combination of these or other origins. In choosing any such ultimate cause we are also depicting a setting, an appropriate course of action, and sets of virtuous and evil characters, and doing so in a way that will appeal to some part of the public that sees its own sentiments or interests reflected in that choice of a social scene.²⁵

The items that media personnel select to illustrate a point or to characterize a political actor need not be intrinsically important to be influential in shaping opinions and evaluations. They do not even need exposure in respected media outlets. That is why House Speaker-designate Bob Livingston resigned from Congress in 1998, when he learned that the publisher of the pornographic *Hustler* magazine was about to publicize charges of adultery about him. Livingston had confessed extramarital liaisons to his colleagues in Congress but feared that an explosion of adverse media publicity would devastate his party and his career.

Socialization

The third function of major mass media that Lasswell mentions is political socialization (chapter 7). It involves learning basic values and orientations that prepare individuals to fit into their cultural milieu. Before the 1970s, studies largely ignored the mass media because parents and the schools were deemed the primary agents of socialization. Research in the 1970s finally established that the media play a crucial role in political socialization.²⁶ Most information that young people acquire about their political world comes directly or indirectly from the mass media either through news offerings or entertainment shows, or through social Web sites such as Facebook or MySpace. The media present specific facts as well as general values, teaching young people which elements produce desirable outcomes. Media also provide the young with behavior models. Because young people lack established attitudes and behaviors, they are receptive to using such information to develop their opinions.

Most of the new orientations and opinions that adults acquire during their lifetime also are based on information from the mass media. People do not

necessarily adopt the precise attitudes and opinions that earn the media's praise; rather, mass media information provides the ingredients that people use to adjust their existing attitudes and opinions to keep pace with a changing world. The mass media deserve credit, therefore, for a sizable share of adult political socialization and resocialization. Examples of resocialization—the restructuring of established basic attitudes—are the shifts in sexual morality and racial attitudes that the American public has undergone since the middle of the last century and the changing views about relations with mainland China and with Russia.²⁷

Manipulation

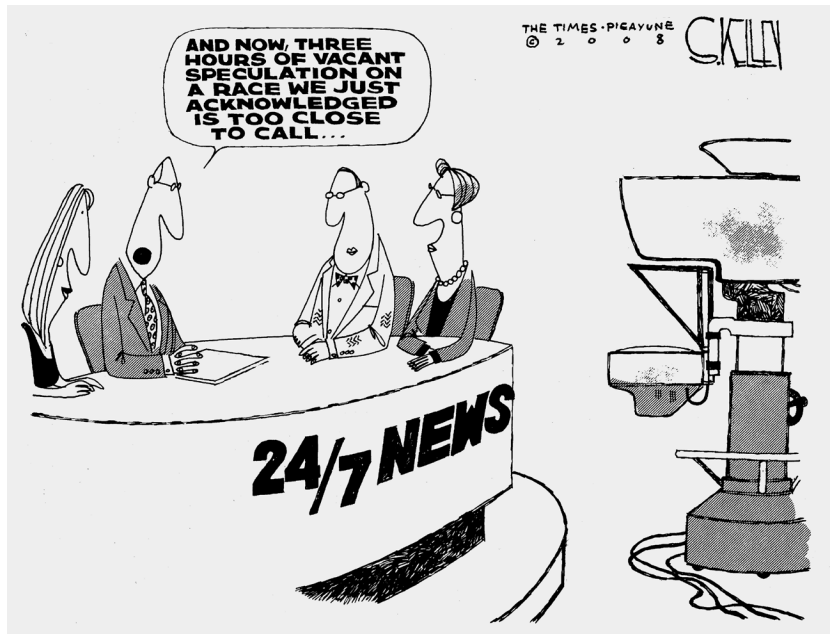
Journalists at prominent news venues periodically become major players in the game of politics; they do not just play their traditional role as chroniclers of information provided by others. The most common way for a journalist to break out of the role of political bystander is through an investigation. Many major print and electronic media enterprises have operated their own investigative units because investigative stories are very popular. They are also expensive to produce and tend to become scarce when media organizations are forced to economize.

The purpose of many investigations is to *muckrake*. Journalists who investigate corruption and wrongdoing to stimulate government to clean up the “dirt” they have exposed are called “muckrakers.” The term comes from a rake designed to collect manure. President Theodore Roosevelt was the first to apply the term to journalism. Muckraking today may have several different goals.²⁸ The journalist's primary purpose may be to write stories that expose misconduct in government and produce reforms. Or the chief purpose may be to present sensational information that attracts large media audiences and enhances profits. Other manipulative stories may be designed to affect politics in line with the journalist's political preferences (chapter 6).

EFFECTS OF MASS MEDIA

The public believes that the media influence politics and public thinking. Politicians act on the basis of the same assumption. But many scholars are skeptical because many research studies fail to show substantial impact. Why is there such a discrepancy between social science appraisals of mass media effects and the general impression, reflected in public policies, that the mass media are extremely influential?

There are three major reasons. First, many studies, particularly those conducted during the 1950s and 1960s, took a narrow approach to media effects, looking for only a few specified effects rather than all effects. Second, theories about learning and how to test it have enhanced the belief because they use the accuracy of expressed memories as the prime indicator for learning. Accordingly, media are deemed to have minimal effects because people often fail to report specific facts mentioned in news stories. Third, social scientists have great



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difficulty identifying media effects because they are embedded in a complex combination of social stimuli.

Early Studies

U.S. social scientists began to study the effects of the mass media primarily in one narrow area: vote change as a result of media coverage of presidential elections. Among these early studies, several are considered classics. *The People's Choice* by Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet, all of Columbia University, reported in 1944 how people made their voting choices in Erie County, Pennsylvania, in the 1940 presidential election. Sequels to the study followed in short order. The best known are *Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign*, *The Voter Decides*, and *The American Voter*.²⁹

Focus on Vote Choices. The early studies were based on the assumption that a well-publicized campaign should change votes. If it did not, this proved that the media lacked influence. Subsequent studies have faulted that reasoning because there may be measurable media influences other than changes in vote choice. Besides, media effects vary depending on the social and political climate during various historical periods. At the time of the early voting studies, change of vote choice was rare because allegiance to parties was strong. Subsequently, party allegiance weakened among many voters, so that the opportunities for media influence on vote choice became far greater.

Had the investigators concentrated on other settings, such as judicial or non-partisan elections (for which few voting cues aside from the media are available), they might also have discovered greater media-induced change in attitude. Substantial media influence might have been found even in presidential elections if changes in people's trust and affection or knowledge about the candidates and the election had been explored. Such changes constitute important media influences that are crucial components of a variety of political behaviors aside from voting.

The early voting studies focused almost exclusively on effects on individuals; they failed to trace effects on the social groups to which individuals belong and through which they influence political events. Gay men might not change their votes after hearing a candidate attack their lifestyle. But they might urge their association to testify against legislation favored by the candidate. They might even participate in violence in the wake of news stories reporting hate crimes against the gay community. In turn, these activities may have major political repercussions. Yet the early studies of media effects ignore such sequential impacts on the political system and its component parts.

The findings that media effects were minimal were so pervasive that social science research into mass media effects fell to a low ebb after an initial flurry in the 1940s and 1950s. Social scientists did not want to waste time studying inconsequential effects. Despite the seemingly solid evidence of media importance, they did not care to swim against the stream of established knowledge. As a consequence, study after study dealing with political socialization and learning ignored the mass media.

Learning Theories. The early findings were all the more believable because they tied in well with theories of persuasion. Mass media messages presumably miss their mark because they are impersonal. They are not tailored to address specific individuals, as are the messages of parents, teachers, and friends. They do not permit the mutual adjustment of messages that leads to consensus in interpersonal conversation. Furthermore, people are rarely compelled to listen to mass media messages and they need not answer. Hence it is easy to ignore media messages.

Although there is a lot of truth to these claims, they fail to consider that television can be a very personal medium. Audiences frequently interact with the television image as if what appears on screen were actually happening in front of them. They may look on television commentators and actors as personal friends. Viewers often imitate people and situations on television and identify with specific characters.

Further support for the minimal-effects findings comes from various cognitive consistency theories. They postulate that average individuals dislike being presented with information that is incompatible with cherished beliefs. Therefore they avoid information that might require changing established beliefs and take note only of messages that match their existing beliefs. Social scientists have evidence that people are indeed selective in their use of the media and search for confirming information. But, as will be discussed more fully in chapter 7, the phenomenon is limited.

Recent Research and Measurement Problems

When researchers resumed their investigations of mass media effects in the wake of persistent evidence of strong media impact, they cast their net more broadly. They began to look beyond effects on voting to other media effects during elections and in other types of political situations. Their research has confirmed media impact on factual learning, on opinion formation, and on citizens' political activities. Scholars also have looked beyond the individual, discovering significant media effects on political systems and subsystems in the United States and elsewhere.³⁰

Aside from the strong scholarly findings, even if media stories lacked impact, they would nonetheless be influential because of the widespread belief that the media are powerful and deserve consideration in the world of politics. In sum, for multiple reasons, media coverage often has a strong impact on ongoing political developments, on the views and behaviors of political elites and other selected groups, and on the general public's perception of political life. As political journalist Theodore White put it, albeit with some exaggeration:

The power of the press in America is a primordial one. It sets the agenda of public discussion; and this sweeping political power is unrestrained by any law. It determines what people will talk and think about—an authority that in other nations is reserved for tyrants, priests, parties, and mandarins.³¹

No major act of the U.S. Congress, no foreign adventure, no act of diplomacy, no great social reform can succeed in the United States unless the press prepares the public mind.³² Although research of media effects has made great strides thanks to improvements in research designs and techniques, research into mass media effects remains hampered by serious measurement problems.

Measuring Complex Effects. Mass media effects are difficult to measure, both at the individual and societal levels, because the effects are highly complex and elusive. The most common measuring device at the individual level—self-assessment of media impact during interviews—is notoriously unreliable. Researchers lack tools to measure human thinking objectively, although advances in brain imaging hold promise for progress. Even when people engage in overt behavior, one cannot judge accurately what messages may have prompted the behavior. Opinion formation and actions spring from a variety of motivations, making it difficult to isolate the media's part.³³

Assessing the impact of particular news stories is especially difficult because mass media audiences bring prior knowledge and attitudes to bear on new information. Because researchers rarely know precisely what those attitudes and knowledge are, or the rules by which they are combined with new information, they cannot pinpoint the exact contribution that particular mass media stories have made to an individual's cognitions, feelings, and actions. To complicate matters further, the impact of the mass media varies depending on the subject matter. For instance, media impact is greater on people's perceptions

of unfamiliar issues than on their perceptions of familiar issues, especially when people have faced them personally.

Establishing effects at the societal level is even more difficult. A good example is the “CNN effect,” which was widely credited as propelling President George H.W. Bush to dispatch U.S. troops to Somalia in 1992. The term refers to the belief that news media, such as the Cable News Network (CNN), inflame public opinion by showing gripping pictures of ongoing crises. The public’s clamor for action then forces government to take action prematurely. Media coverage becomes the dog that wags the public policy tail. In the Somalia case, CNN and other television networks had aired reports and pictures of widespread starvation and devastation in the summer months of 1992. Those pictures presumably inflamed the public and aroused pressure groups, which forced members of the Bush administration, against their better judgment, to airlift relief supplies and later to dispatch U.S. troops to Somalia. The rescue effort ultimately failed, and U.S. lives were lost.³⁴

Political scientists Steven Livingston and Todd Eachus reached a different conclusion about the respective roles of the news media and the Bush administration in determining U.S. policy in Somalia. After examining a variety of sources, including *New York Times* and *Washington Post* stories about U.S. humanitarian relief policies, and after interviewing key government decision makers and long-term relief personnel in Somalia, Livingston and Eachus concluded that plans for relief efforts had been under way for more than a year prior to CNN coverage of the tragedy. Government officials, including concerned members of Congress who had traveled to Somalia, rather than television news stories, had been the spur to action.

Despite persuasive evidence that extensive media coverage of the tragedy followed, rather than preceded, President Bush’s announcement of the military airlift and other relief measures on August 14, 1992, many observers still argue that media mobilization of public opinion was an essential prerequisite for the Somalia intervention. They claim that the administration would have avoided the airlift in the absence of media coverage of the tragedy. Absolute proof, one way or the other, does not exist. Inability to prove the scope of mass media impact beyond a doubt has made social scientists shy away from assessing media influence on many important political events. Some social scientists even go to the other extreme and deny that effects exist simply because the effects defy precise measurement. This is unfortunate, because many important elusive effects can be readily observed in the field. Also, many news stories have significant consequences that are never measured or even acknowledged. For example, the stock market is highly sensitive to news reports that might have economic consequences. A brief story about one patient’s “miracle cure” from an unusual disease may send drug company stocks soaring or nose-diving, even when the story was barely a blip on the audience’s attention screen.

Statistical versus Political Significance. Social scientists often underestimate media impact because they falsely equate statistical significance with political significance. Media impact on a statistically insignificant number of

individuals can still have major political consequences. For example, during an election, only 1 percent or 2 percent of the voters may change their votes because of media stories. That is a statistically negligible effect. From a political standpoint, however, the impact may be major, because many important elections, including several presidential elections, have been decided by a tiny margin of votes. The 2000 presidential race was decided by a fraction of less than 1 percent of the vote in Florida. Overall, more than 105 million votes were cast for president. An “insignificant” 1 percent of that total still represented more than one million people.

On a smaller scale, if a broadcast of details of a race riot attracts a few listeners to the riot site and stimulates some to participate, the situation may escalate beyond control. In the same way, the impact of a single news story may change the course of history if it induces one assassin to kill a world leader or convinces one world leader to go to war.

Influencing Elites. Another problem with social science research on mass media effects is that it has concentrated on measuring the effects on ordinary individuals rather than on political elites. The average individual, despite contrary democratic fictions, is fairly unimportant in the political process. Mass media impact on a handful of political decision makers usually is vastly more significant because it influences how they conduct political affairs. This is why governments everywhere, in authoritarian as well as democratic societies, try to control the flow of information produced by the media lest it thwart their political objectives.³⁵

WHO SHOULD CONTROL NEWS MAKING?

Attempts by governments to control and manipulate the media are universal because public officials everywhere believe that media are important political forces. This belief is based on the assumption that institutions that control the public's information supply can shape public knowledge and behavior and thereby determine support for government or opposition to it. Although media control occurs in all societies, its extent, nature, and purposes vary for several reasons. Political ideology is an important one. In countries in which free expression of opinion is highly valued and in which dissent is respected, the media tend to be comparatively unrestrained. The right of the press to criticize governments also flourishes when the prevailing ideology grants that governments are fallible and often corrupt and that average citizens are capable of forming valuable opinions about the conduct of government. Finally, freedom of the press, even when it becomes a thorn in the side of the government, is more easily tolerated when governments are well established and politically and economically secure. In nations where governments are unstable and resources insufficient to meet the country's needs, it may be difficult to put up with press behavior that is apt to topple the government or retard its plans for economic development.

Nowhere are the media totally free from formal and informal government and social controls, even in times of peace. On the whole, authoritarian

governments control more extensively and more rigidly than nonauthoritarian ones, but all control systems represent points on a continuum. There are also gradations of control within nations, depending on the current regime and political setting, regional and local variations, and the nature of news. The specifics of control systems vary from country to country, but the overall patterns are similar.³⁶

Authoritarian Control Systems

Authoritarian control systems may be based on a totalitarian ideology and designed to control and use the media to support ideological goals, or they may be nonideological and simply represent the desire of the ruling elites to control media output tightly so that it does not interfere with their conduct of government. Examples of nonideological authoritarian control exist in states ruled by military governments or where constitutional guarantees have been suspended. Cuba and China are examples of control based on communist ideology.

In today's world, fully or partially authoritarian systems of media control prevail in the majority of countries, although many governments profess to want a less-controlled system and are struggling to move in that direction. Nonetheless, government attempts to control internal and external news flows are omnipresent because governments fear that unrestrained media will create serious political instability, whether through accurate messages or through unintentionally or deliberately false ones.

Authoritarian systems operate on the assumption that government must control the media because news stories are essential for engendering support for the government's mission (Table 1-2). The media may point out minor deficiencies or corruption of low-level officials and suggest adjustments in line with prevailing policies, but criticism of the basic system or its rulers is considered destructive.

Beyond that, the media are free to choose the stories they wish to publish, so long as government officials agree that the stories do not interfere with public policies. In totalitarian societies the likely political and social effects of a story—rather than its general significance, novelty, or audience appeal—determine what will be published and what will be buried in silence. For instance, news about accidents, disasters, and crimes is often suppressed because of fears that it may weaken the image of an all-powerful political system. Even entertainment programs, such as music and drama performances and cartoon shorts in movie theaters, must carry appropriate social messages or have historical significance. The government supports such entertainment financially because it serves the important public purpose of shaping people's minds in support of the political system.

Democratic Systems

In democracies, the public sees journalists as its eyes and ears. Journalists are expected to scrutinize government performance and report their findings. If media surveillance causes governments to fall and public officials to be ousted, democracy is well served.

TABLE 1-2 **Media Roles under Different Regime Types**

<i>Authoritarian regime assumptions</i>	<i>Democratic regime assumptions</i>
Governments know and serve people's best interests.	Governments often fail to serve people's best interests.
Media should stress the government's virtues.	Media should confront the government when officials and policies seem flawed.
News should engender support for major policies.	News should stimulate critical thinking about major policies.
News and entertainment programs should be selected for their social values.	News and entertainment programs should be selected for audience appeal.

Source: Composed by the author.

Although this is the theory behind the role of media in democratic societies, the practice is less clear-cut. In the United States, for example, neither newspeople nor government officials are completely at ease with the media's watchdog role. The media limit their criticism to what they perceive as perversions of the public's basic social and political values or noteworthy examples of corruption and waste. They rarely question the widely accepted fundamentals of the political system, such as its orientation toward majority rule or private capitalism or individualism.

Because American journalists tend to choose established elites as their primary sources of news, their links to the existing power structures are strong. They may even share information with government agencies, including law enforcement bodies such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Central Intelligence Agency. When disclosure might cause harm, reporters in a democratic society occasionally withhold important news at the request of the government. This has happened repeatedly when the lives of hostages were at stake or when military interventions were imminent. In an effort to keep their images untarnished by media attacks, government officials may try to control the media through regulatory legislation or through rewards and punishments (chapter 9).

The chief responsibility of the news media in democratic societies is to provide the general public with information and entertainment. According to the U.S. version of the *libertarian* philosophy, anything that happens that seems interesting or important for media audiences may become news. It should be reported quickly, accurately, and without any attempt to convey a particular point of view. Topics with the widest audience appeal should be pervasive, which explains the ample doses of sex and violence. Audience appeal is then expected to translate into good profits for media owners either through fees paid by audience members or through advertising revenues. Although audiences may learn

important things from the media, libertarians believe that teaching is not the media's chief task. Nor is it their responsibility to question the truth, accuracy, or merits of the information supplied to them by their sources. Rather, it is left to the news audience to decide what to believe and what to doubt.

By contrast, adherents to the tenets of social responsibility believe that news and entertainment presented by the mass media should reflect societal concerns. Media personnel should be participants in the political process, not merely reporters of the passing scene. As guardians of the public welfare, they should foster political action when necessary by publicizing social evils such as rampant industrial pollution of air and water. In a similar vein, undesirable viewpoints and questionable accusations should be denied exposure, however sensational they may be. If reporters believe that the government is hiding information that the public needs to know, they should try to discover the facts and publicize them.

Social responsibility journalism and totalitarian journalism share some important features. Both approaches advocate using the media to support the basic ideals of their societies and to shape people into more perfect beings. Proponents of both schools of journalism are convinced that their goals are good and would not be achieved in a media system dominated by the whims of media owners, advertisers, or audiences. But the similarities should not be exaggerated. Social advocacy in democratic systems lacks the fervor, clout, and single-mindedness it has in their totalitarian counterparts. Social responsibility journalism rarely speaks with a single uncontested voice throughout society. Nevertheless, it frightens and antagonizes many news professionals and news audiences. If one agrees that the media should be used to influence social thought and behavior for "good" purposes, who should decide which purposes deserve to be included in that category? Critics of social responsibility journalism point out that journalists do not have a public mandate to act as arbiters of social values and policies in a society that has many disparate visions of truth and goodness. Newspeople lack the legitimacy that comes only from being elected by the public or appointed by duly elected officials.

Irrespective of the merits or faults of these arguments, today social responsibility journalism is popular with a sizable portion of the news profession.³⁷ Pulitzer prizes and other honors go to journalists who have successfully exposed questionable practices in the interest of social improvement. The most prominent "villains" targeted for exposure are usually big government and big business.³⁸

MODELS OF NEWS MAKING

Beyond the basic concerns reflected in the philosophies of libertarians and social responsibility advocates, there are many other guiding principles for reporting events. For example, news making can be described in terms of five distinct models: the mirror model, the professional model, the organizational model, the political model, and the civic journalism model. Each represents judgments about the major forces behind news making that shape the nature of news and its political impact.

Underlying Theories

Proponents of the mirror model contend that news is and should be a reflection of reality. “We don’t make the news, we just report it,” is their slogan. The implication is that newspeople impartially report all significant happenings that come to their attention. Critics of the mirror model point out that this conception of news making is unrealistic. Millions of significant events take place daily, forcing journalists to determine their relative newsworthiness and decide which to report. Events that are publicized inevitably loom disproportionately large compared with unpublicized events. The way the story is framed in words and pictures further distorts reality.

In the professional model, news making is viewed as an endeavor of highly skilled professionals who put together a balanced and interesting collage of events selected for importance and attractiveness to specific media audiences. There is no pretense that the end product mirrors the world. For economic reasons, anticipated audience reaction is especially influential in determining which stories pass scrutiny and which are ignored.

The organizational model, sometimes called the “bargaining model,” is based on organizational theory. Its proponents contend that the pressures inherent in organizational processes and goals determine which items will be published. Pressures spring from interpersonal relations among journalists and between them and their information sources, from professional norms within the news organization and from constraints arising from technical news production processes, cost-benefit considerations, and legal regulations.

The political model rests on the assumption that news everywhere reflects the ideological biases of individual newspeople as well as the pressures of the political environment in which the news organization operates. The media cover high-status people and approved institutions; people and events outside the dominant system or remote from the centers of power are generally ignored. Supporters of the prevailing system are pictured as good guys, opponents as bad guys.

In the 1990s public journalism, or civic journalism, became popular, spurred by widespread concern that average citizens shun participation in public affairs and distrust government and the news media. Proponents of the civic journalism model believe that the press can discover citizens’ concerns and then write stories that help audiences play an active and successful role in public life.³⁹ Journalists must articulate and explain public policy choices in understandable language. They must facilitate a public dialogue that encourages and respects diverse views. After consensus has been reached among the clients of a particular news venue, the venue and its clients must vigorously champion appropriate public policies.

None of these models fully explains news making; rather, the process reflects all of them in varying degrees. Because the influences that shape news making fluctuate, one needs to examine individual news making situations carefully to account for the factors at work. Organizational pressures, for instance, depend on the interactions of people within the organization. Audience tastes change or are interpreted differently. Perceptions of “facts”

differ, depending on reporters' dispositions. Moreover, the precise mix of factors that explains news making in any particular instance depends largely on chance and on the needs of a particular news medium.

Control Methods

Societies use legal, normative, structural, and economic means to control news media within their countries. All countries have laws to prevent common press misbehavior. For instance, laws may forbid publication of deliberate falsehoods. All societies also have social norms that the press generally heeds because it craves public approval or fears government or private sector retaliation. Hence media are unlikely to ridicule sacred concepts or widely accepted morality principles. The way media organizations are structured, operated, and financed also shapes their product. The Russian government closely regulates and controls media enterprises and finances them. Given these arrangements, Russian media dare not criticize the government's war against rebels in Chechnya. The few dissenters who did had their voices stilled in various ways. Journalists' behavior reflects the nature of their environments.⁴⁰ They are docile and obey rules strictly in countries where media control is heavy-handed, and they become far more daring and unconventional in liberal, individualistically oriented countries such as the United States and England.

The combination of methods by which governments control the media varies, and so do the major objectives of control. Governments can control media content by limiting entry into the media business. For example, the government may require licenses for entry and grant them only to people it deems desirable, as is common in authoritarian societies. By contrast, democratic regimes rarely make formal attempts to deny foes of the regime access to the media. However, because the capacity of the broadcast spectrum is limited, control through franchise is quite common for electronic media. Franchises often bestow monopoly control. In most democracies, newspapers rarely need licenses, and access to the Internet has remained equally unrestricted. In the United States, for instance, anyone with sufficient money can start a newspaper or newsletter or create a Web site or blog.

Media also may be controlled through the manipulation of access to news. Information may be put beyond the reach of media by declaring it to be "confidential" and by barring reporters from government archives. In addition to such formal control of potentially damaging news, informal restraints curb the actual flow of news. All government units, and often many of their subdivisions, have information control systems by which they determine which news to conceal or release and how to frame it (chapter 9). In 1993 President Clinton, who was annoyed with reporting about his presidency, took the unusual step of limiting reporters' easy access to the White House communication office by closing off a connecting hallway to the press room.⁴¹

Authoritarian governments often use censorship laws or regulations to control the flow of news. In some countries nothing may be printed or broadcast until the government censor has approved it. At times governments will

direct papers or magazines to make deletions after their product has been prepared for printing or is already printed. This leaves tantalizing white spaces or missing pages. Government officials often write or edit television and radio scripts, and media outlets must broadcast these without editorial changes. In the past, totalitarian countries could frequently block all unapproved communications from abroad by jamming foreign broadcasts and prohibiting the import of foreign printed materials. In the Internet age, such controls have become well-nigh impossible. Democratic governments also often use legal and normative pressures to avert potentially damaging political news or news that violates widely cherished social norms. They commonly claim that concerns about press freedoms have motivated the restrictions on news. Publication controls increase markedly in periods of crisis and war.

All governments use treason and sedition laws to control media output. Treason and sedition can be defined broadly or narrowly. Anything that is critical of the government can be called treasonable or seditious, especially in times of war. In democratic societies, media and the government are in perennial disagreement about the tipping point. Governments lean toward protection; the media lean toward disclosure. People judged guilty of treason or sedition may be sentenced to prison or even executed. Given the social pressures to act patriotically and the severity of the penalty, treason is rare. Most journalists avoid difficulties with official censors and with treason and sedition laws by refraining from using material that is likely to be objectionable. Formal government censorship then becomes replaced largely by social pressures and self-censorship—which are the most potent forms of constraint on human behaviors.

The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which provides that “Congress shall make no law...abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press,” has given the media an exceptionally strong basis for resisting government controls in the United States. The courts have ruled, however, that the protection is not absolute. On occasion, it must give way to social rights that the courts consider to be superior. For example, media are forbidden from publicizing the names of CIA secret agents because that would endanger them and destroy their usefulness.

A limited number of controls, such as regulatory laws, court decisions, and informal social pressures, guard against excesses by the media. In the United States the courts have been loath to impose restraints prior to publication, such as granting injunctions that would stop publication of information on the grounds that it would cause irreparable harm. But informal social and political pressures and the fear of indictments after publication have restrained presentation of potentially disturbing stories. Besides guarding state survival through treason and sedition laws, government controls commonly shield sensitive governmental proceedings, protect individual reputations and privacy, and safeguard the prevailing moral standards of the community. Curbs on publication of government secrets—so-called classified information—often engender controversy because governments tend to be overzealous in controlling material

that they deem potentially harmful to themselves. Finally, most governments also have laws protecting the reputations of individuals or groups and laws against obscenity (chapter 3).

Defining the limits of government control over information dissemination raises difficult questions for democratic societies. Does official censorship, however minimal, open the way for excessive curbs on free expression? What guidelines are available to determine how far censorship should go? What types of material, if any, can harm children? Or adults? Should ethnic and racial slurs be prohibited on the ground that they damage minorities' self-image? The answers are controversial and problematic.

The limitations on the freedom of publication in democratic societies raise questions about the actual differences in press freedom in democratic and authoritarian societies. Is there really a difference, for example, in the independence of government-operated television networks in France and in North Korea? The answer is a resounding "yes." The degree of restraint varies so sharply that the systems are fundamentally different. In authoritarian societies the main objective of controls is to support the regime in power. In democratic societies the media are usually free to oppose the regime, to weaken it, and even to topple it. Although the media rarely carry their power to the latter extreme, the potential is there. It is this potential that makes the media in democratic societies a genuine restraint on governmental abuses of power and a potent shaper of government action.

SUMMARY

The mass media are an important influence on politics because they regularly and rapidly present politically crucial information to huge audiences. These audiences include political elites and decision makers, as well as large numbers of average citizens whose political activities, however sporadic, are shaped by information from the mass media.

Decisions made by media personnel about what and whom to cover determine what information becomes available to media audiences and what remains unavailable. By putting stories into perspective and interpreting them, reporters assign meaning to the information and indicate the standards by which it ought to be judged. At times, reporters even generate political action directly through their own investigations or indirectly through their capacity to stimulate pseudo-events.

Although social scientists still find it difficult to pinpoint the scope of media impact on particular political events, politicians and their governments everywhere are keenly aware of the political importance of the media. Therefore, these governments have policies to shape the media's political role in their societies. Those policies have been buttressed by constitutional and legal rules as well as by a host of informal arrangements. In this chapter we have described briefly how the basic policies, constitutional arrangements, and legal provisions differ in authoritarian and democratic regimes.

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