

MEDIA AND AMERICAN POLITICS



OVERVIEW

INTRODUCTION

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

THE MASS MEDIA TODAY

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

The Reagan White House operated on the following seven principles: plan ahead stay on the offensive control the flow of information limit reporters' access to the president talk about the issues you want to talk about speak in one voice repeat the same message many times

THE DEVELOPMENT OF MEDIA POLITICS

The daily newspaper is largely a product of the late nineteenth century, while radio and television have been around only since the first half of the twentieth century. As recently as the presidency of Herbert Hoover (1929-1933), reporters submitted their questions to the president in writing, and he responded in writing (if at all). Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933-1945) was the first president to use the media effectively. Roosevelt held

about *one thousand press conferences* in his twelve years in the White House and broadcast a series of "*fireside chats*" over the radio to reassure the nation during the Great Depression.

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

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

REPORTING THE NEWS

Although the American media is free and independent when it comes to journalistic content, they are totally dependent on advertising revenues to keep their businesses going. That is, news reporting is a *business* in America in which *profits shape how journalists define what is newsworthy, where they get their information, and how they present it*. To a large extent, TV networks define *news* as what is entertaining to the average viewer - *infotainment*.

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

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

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

The charge that the media have a *liberal bias* has become a familiar one in American politics, and there is some limited evidence to support it. Reporters are more likely to call themselves liberal than the general public, and more journalists identify themselves as Democrats than Republicans. However, there is little reason to believe that journalists' personal attitudes sway their reporting of the news. Most stories are presented in a "point/counterpoint" format in which two opposing points of view are presented.

A conclusion that news reporting contains little explicit *partisan or ideological bias* is *not* to argue that it does not *distort reality* in its coverage. Ideally, the news should mirror reality. In practice, there are too many potential stories for this to be the case. Journalists must select which stories to cover and to what degree. Due to economic pressures, the media are biased in favor of stories with high drama that will attract people's interest

(rather than extended analyses of complex issues). Television is particularly biased toward stories that generate good pictures. Seeing a talking head (a shot of a person's face talking directly to the camera) is boring; viewers will switch channels in search of more interesting visual stimulation.

THE NEWS AND PUBLIC OPINION

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

THE MEDIA'S AGENDA-SETTING FUNCTION

As was explained earlier people are trying to influence the government's **policy agenda** when they confront government officials with problems they expect them to solve. Interest groups, political parties, politicians, public relations firms, and bureaucratic agencies are all pushing for their priorities to take precedence over others. *Political activists* (often called **policy entrepreneurs**-people who invest their political "capital" in an issue) depend heavily upon the *media* to get their ideas placed high on the governmental agenda.

The *staging of political events to attract media attention* is a political art form. Important political events are orchestrated minute by minute with an eye on American TV audiences. Moreover, it is not only the elites who have successfully used the media. Civil rights groups in the 1960s relied heavily on the media to tell their stories of unjust treatment. Many believe that the introduction of television helped to accelerate the movement by graphically showing Americans (in both the North and South) what the situation was.

UNDERSTANDING THE MASS MEDIA

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

The watchdog function of the media *helps to keep government small*. Many observers feel that the press is *biased against whoever holds office* and that reporters want to expose them in the media. With every new proposal being met with skepticism, regular constraints are placed on the growth of government. Conversely, when they focus on injustice in society, the media inevitably *encourage the growth of government*. The media *portray government as responsible for handling* almost every major problem.

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

The rise of the "information society" has not brought about a corresponding rise of an "informed society." With the media's superficial treatment of important policy issues, it is not surprising that the incredible amount of information available to Americans today has not visibly increased their political awareness or participation.

The media's defense is to say that this is what the people want. Since they are in business to make a profit, they have to appeal to the maximum number of people.

TIMELINE

Major Events in the History of Mass Media

3000 BCE +: Early Innovations

3300 BCE Egyptians perfect hieroglyphics
1500 BCE Semites devise the alphabet;
1000 BCE Egyptian papyrus, early form of paper
60 BCE *Acta Diurna* [Day's Events], forerunner of the newspaper

1041 Printing by means of separate, movable characters in China
1446 Johannes Gutenberg introduces moveable type printing press in Germany
1468 William Caxton produces a book in England with the first printed advertisement
1500s Printing books and pamphlets increases

1600 – 1800: Colonial Era and Early Republic Years

1609 First newspapers in Europe
1638 Puritans establish Cambridge Press
1690 Ben Harris prints first Colonial newspaper [*Publick Occurrences, Both Foreign and Domestic*] in Boston
1721 James Franklin exercises the privilege of editorial independence (*The New England Courant*)
1729 Ben Franklin prints money after calling for paper currency [*A Modest Inquiry into the Nature and Necessity of a Paper Currency*]
1731 Ben Franklin founds first public library
1732 *Poor Richard's Almanack* helps create popular culture in America
1741 Andrew Bradford prints *American Magazine*
1798 *Alien and Sedition Act*

1800 – 1900: Telegraph Era and the Start of the Industrial Revolution

1821 National magazines [*The Saturday Evening Post*]
1827 First African American newspaper [*Freedom's Journal*]
1828 Sara Josepha Hale, women's magazine pioneer [*Ladies' Magazine*]
1841 Horace Greeley introduces the editorial page
1844 First telegraph line set by Samuel Morse
1852 Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* becomes the first blockbuster in U.S. book publishing
1857 James Buchanan's Inauguration, first photographed
1858 First transatlantic cable
1865 Abraham Lincoln's assassination is reported by telegraph and print
1876 Alexander Graham Bell invents the telephone
1877 Thomas Edison invents the phonograph
1879 Congress gives discount postal rates to magazines
1880s Yellow journalism causes Joseph Pulitzer to establish criteria for journalism and literature through the Pulitzer Prize
1887 Nellie Bly joins Pulitzer's newspaper *New York World* as a reporter
1885 George Eastman invents photographic film
1894 Guglielmo Marconi invents the radio
1895 Congress establishes the Government Printing Office

1899 Gilbert Grosvenor introduces photographs in *National Geographic*

Early 1900s: Industrial Revolution Era and Golden Ages of Radio, TV, and Movies

1905 Robert S. Abbott founds *Chicago Defender*, African-American newspaper
1914 U.S.-based Spanish paper [*El Diario-La Prensa*] debuts
1914 Congress creates the *Federal Trade Commission* to prevent unfair advertising
1920s Joseph Maxwell introduces electrical microphones
1923 Henry Luce and Briton Hadden launch *Time*, first newsmagazine
1923 First radio network linkup carries the World Series
1925 Calvin Coolidge's Inauguration, first on radio
1927 William Paley creates CBS from a 16-affiliate radio network
1927 First TV transmission by Philo Farnsworth
1931 Case of *Near v. Minnesota*
1935 Franklin Delano Roosevelt debuts Fireside Chats on radio
1935 George Gallup founds Institute of American Public Opinion
1940s Audiotape is developed in Germany
1940s Community antenna television system, early cable
1940s Digital technology, early Internet technology
1940s A. C. Nielsen conducts listener survey
1941 Pearl Harbor attack is reported by radio
1944 First large automatic digital computer is built at Harvard
1947 CBS and NBC begin first newscasts
1949 Harry Truman's Inauguration, first televised
1950s Black-and-white television becomes part of the average American home
1951 Edward R. Murrow, pioneers television news
1955 Dwight David Eisenhower, televises press conference
1954 Color TV system is approved by the FCC

1960s: Cold War Decade

1960s Rise of FM radio
1961 John Fitzgerald Kennedy, debuts live press conferences
1962 J.C.R. Licklider proposes concept of Internet
1963 John Kennedy's assassination is reported by television
1963 Katherine Graham assumes presidency of *The Washington Post*
1963 Barbara Walters becomes female anchor of the *Today Show*
1963 Audiocassettes are introduced
1966 Telstar I satellite telephone and TV signals
1967 Congress creates the Corporation for Public Broadcasting
1968 *60 Minutes* debuts
1969 *Tinker v. Des Moines*, U. S. Supreme Court decision
1969 Neil Armstrong's walk on the Moon is televised in color globally
1969 DOD's ARPAnet, predecessor of the Internet

1970s: Social Issues Decade

1970s TV sitcoms address political and social issues
1970s Email is developed
1971 Microprocessor is developed
1971 *New York Times* publishes the *Pentagon Papers*

1974 Vinton Cerf and Bob Kahn, “founding fathers” of the Internet
1975 Bill Gates and Paul Allen, co-founders of Microsoft
1975 VCRs are introduced
1976 Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak, co-founders of Apple Computer, Inc.
1976 Cable is broadcast by Ted Turner
1976 Ed Bradley, first African-American White House television correspondent
1977 VHS-format videocassettes

1980s: Cable Television Decade

1980s Color television replaces black-and-white in American homes
1980s Fiber-optic cable
1980s Hypertext links to Web
1980 First online newspaper [*Columbus Dispatch*]
1980 CNN, first 24-hour news station, debuts
1981 IBM PC is introduced
1982 *USA Today* debuts
1982 CDs are introduced
1985 *Microsoft Windows* is launched
1986 MCI Mail, first commercial email service
1986 *Bethel v. Fraser*, U.S. Supreme Court decision
1988 *Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier*, U. S. Supreme Court decision
1989 Compaq laptop computer is launched

1990s: Digital Decade

1990s Rise of talk radio
1990s Rise of independent film
1991 Sir Timothy John Berners-Lee invents the World Wide Web
1991 Web expands online news and information
1993 Marc Andreessen creates predecessor to Netscape browser
1994 Direct Broadcast Satellite service is launched
1995 *Microsoft Internet Explorer* is launched
1997 William Jefferson Clinton’s Inauguration is live on the Internet
1997 DVDs replace VHS format
1997 First news blogs are introduced

2000+: Age of Media Convergence

2000s Rise of cell phone use and cellular technology
2001 9/11 Attacks are reported immediately through multimedia
2001 iPod and MP3 format compressed digital files debut
2001 Dominance of newspaper chains and media conglomerates
2001 Instant message services
2002 TV standard changes to digital
2002 Satellite radio is launched
2004 Broadband is in half of American homes
2005 Google Library Book Project, digitization of books
2006 Google Video Pilot Project, digitization of National Archives films
2006 Citizen journalists record events on cellular cameras and technology
2007 *Morse v. Frederick*, U. S. Supreme Court decision
2007 Presidential debates on YouTube

FOUR BIASES THAT MATTER

From Bennett, (2003). *News: The politics of illusion*, 5th ed. New York: Longman.

It is a writer's obligation to impose narrative. Everyone does this. Even, time you take a lump of material and turn it into something you are imposing a narrative. It's a writer's obligation to do this. And, by the same token, it is apparently a journalist's obligation to pretend that he never does anything of the sort. The journalist claims to believe that the narrative emerges from the lump of material, rises up and smacks you in the face like marsh gas.

Nora Ephron

When George W. Bush announced his presidential candidacy a breathtaking seventeen months before the 2000 presidential election, he did so on a movie-set stage in Iowa, surrounded by bales of hay and a shiny red forklift behind him. The day's news coverage anointed him the front-runner. As if to prove their point, reporters noted that Bush attracted by far the greatest press entourage, even though three other prominent candidates were also campaigning in the state that day. Mr. Bush wittily acknowledged that news organizations have choices about where they assign reporters, as he took the microphone on his campaign plane shortly after it took off for Iowa that morning. He quipped to the crowd of reporters on board: "Thanks for coming. We know you have a choice of candidates when you fly, and we appreciate you choosing Great Expectations." Great Expectations was the nickname he gave the plane as part of a larger spin effort to defuse the typical pattern of news building up expectations about candidates only to dramatize their next fall. Mr. Bush again played flight attendant when he asked the reporters to "Please stow your expectations securely in your overhead bins, as they may shift during the trip and can fall and hurt someone—especially me."

OUR
CORPORATE
MEDIA
MASTERS
Page | 7

This campaign 2000 story was written more in an entertainment format than as a means to deliver serious political information; it was personality-centered, well-scripted, and set as a comedy scene in which Mr. Bush played a flight attendant doing the pre-takeoff announcement. The story was also artificial in the sense of being disconnected from larger questions about the race, the issues, or Mr. Bush's qualifications for being president. Most importantly, there was no clear basis on which the Washington press had decreed him the front-runner. True, the ability to deliver clever lines may be some qualification for being president, but the readers of the news story would be unable to know if Mr. Bush uttered that monologue spontaneously or if it was scripted as part his advisors' communication strategy to win over a skeptical press pack. Perhaps, in the mediated reality of contemporary politics, the distinction between an innate ability to think on one's feet and learning to deliver a scripted performance no longer matters.

A closer look at this front-runner story and the campaign news that surrounded it reveals one tangible political condition mentioned in passing that might explain why journalists granted Mr. Bush the early lead: money. Mr. Bush had already set a record for early campaign fund-raising. Raising the largest amount of money makes a candidate front-runner in the eyes of political insiders, as well as in the story lines of the prominent national journalists who cover politics from the perspectives of insiders. Pegging the political fortunes of candidates to the sizes of their war chests is not an idle measure of potential electoral success. It is money, after all, that indicates the strength of business and interest group belief that a candidate will support their political goals. And it takes money to bring a candidate's political messages to voters who are more expensive to reach than ever before. Yet one of the reasons that people are hard to reach is that they tend not to trust politicians or the journalists who cover them. And one of the reasons that people mistrust the political establishment is money. Both polls and public interest groups often identify money as one of the ills of politics.

The insider view that politics is bitter, partisan, personalized, manipulative and money-driven may be a defensible perspective (it is the inside view, after all), but this does not make it the only choice that news organizations have about how to cover government. This is not to argue that topics such as money should be ignored in campaign coverage. To the contrary, the question is how news organizations decide to play those topics in their stories.

Consider the choices that news organizations have in how to frame a campaign story in which money is a potential plot element. *Framing involves choosing a broad organizing theme for selecting, emphasizing, and linking the elements of a story such as the scenes, the characters, their actions, and supporting documentation.* For example the framing of the previous story might have been shifted from the *horse race* to the *money chase*, with a serious investigation of the interests to which Mr. Bush and the other candidates might be indebted. Yet the above story and hundreds more that followed it throughout the campaign told the tale of the horse race one more time. In the horse race plot, money is generally left poorly developed in the background, requiring us to decode the reasons why George W. Bush may be the leading candidate. Also typical of many political stories, this dramatized news fragment was implicitly negative. Money has become a code for what ails our public life, a disruptive or disordering principle in the democratic order of things.

The opening of the Bush presidential campaign thus displayed the information biases of many political news stories: (1) it was personality oriented, (2) with dramatic staging and scripting, (3) that left it fragmented or disconnected from underlying political issues and realities (such as Mr. Bush's issue positions or other qualifications for being named the leading candidate), and (4) its implicit message (about money in this case) is typically negative, suggesting threats to the normal order of things. The result is that while people may tune in to news for its entertainment value, they also find reason in many stories to doubt or dismiss politics in general.

This communication system appears to contribute to a public that is increasingly cynical and disillusioned with politics and government. The paradox is that journalists complain about the over-scripted campaigns, and, more generally, the staged events they cover, but they seem unable to find other ways to write stories or to replace the cynical tone with perspectives that might help citizens become more engaged. As a result of these and other factors, large numbers of people actively avoid politics, while watching the media spectacle with a mixture of disbelief and disapproval. Meanwhile more people escape from public affairs and political participation into ever more personalized media worlds that one observer has likened to the gated communities and suburban enclaves into which many people have physically migrated in society.

Let's move from the opening story of the 2000 election to the dramatic conclusion. To make a long story short, the *Bush as front-runner* story (with minor variations) swept through the news media for a time until it was replaced by other campaign *horse race* dramas, often with Mr. Gore as front-runner, each creating an episode to advance a long running story that must (if we are to call it news) continue to develop. Thus Mr. Bush and Democratic front-runner Al Gore jockeyed through the primaries, walked through heavily-scripted conventions, see-sawed through the debates, and finally headed to the finish line in one of the closest contests in American history. In an unexpected twist, the story was jarred from its predictable ending (an election night winner) because the electoral vote count was so close that it did not decide the result. The dispute over a handful of votes in Florida was eventually ended by a Supreme Court ruling that left many on both sides angry at the process that determined the result.

Did this photo finish in the presidential horse race of 2000 draw a large crowd of excited spectators?

Hardly. The voter turnout reached a new modern era low beneath 50 percent. Continuous weekly polling of voters by *The Vanishing Voter*, a Harvard project led by Thomas Patterson and Marvin Kalb, revealed that a

majority of voters did not become interested in the election until after it was over and the dispute in Florida broke out.

The point here is not to place the blame for civic disengagement on the news media. Journalists complained throughout the campaign that they had little to work with. How much more could they say about Al Gore's woodenness or George Bush's feeble grasp of foreign policy? Yet this begs the question: Why were journalists acting like movie critics giving barely passing reviews to all those poorly-scripted and repetitively-acted political performances? Why was there so little innovative coverage that might stimulate citizen engagement with the election either on the level of the candidates (for example, the political and economic interests that they represented) or on the level of stirring involvement beyond the momentary act of voting in the most important democratic ritual in the civic culture?

It is remarkable that the leading news organizations not only converged in their horse race and campaign strategy coverage, but they stuck with those narrative choices in the face of clear voter disinterest. Even in the final weeks of the contest, stories with standardized dramatized framings such as the *horse race*, the *war room*, and other military metaphors outnumbered stories on all the issues in the race, combined, by a wide margin. For example, a study of *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* in the final two weeks of the campaign showed that dramatized framings of the race or the strategic conflict outnumbered all policy issue stories by a margin of 69 to 45 in the *Post*, while the *Times*' melodrama-to-issue gap was even greater at 93 to 63. *Consider the possibility that the choices of such narrative framings of politics contain information biases that are far more serious and at the same time more difficult for the average person to detect than ideological biases.*

A Different Kind of Bias

This [article] takes a close look at news content. The concern is with information biases that make news hard to use as a guide to citizen action because they obscure the big picture in which daily events take place, and, in addition, they often convey a negative or cynical tone about politics that undermines citizen motivation for digging deeper to learn more or to become engaged.... Most debates about journalistic bias are concerned with the question of ideology. For example, does the news have a liberal or conservative, a Democratic or Republican, drift? To briefly review the argument, some variations in news content or political emphasis may occur, but they can seldom be explained as the result of journalists routinely injecting their partisan views into the news. To the contrary, the avoidance of political partisanship by journalists is reinforced, among other means, by the professional ethics codes of journalists, by the editors who monitor their work, and by the business values of the companies they work for.

Another important point to recall is that people who see a consistent ideological press bias (that is, across most stories or over extended periods of time) are seeing it with the help of their own ideology. This generalization is supported by opinion research showing that people in the middle see the press as generally neutral, whereas those on the left complain that the news is too conservative, and those on the right think the news has a left-leaning bias. There are at least two ironies in this ongoing and inherently unresolvable debate about ideological bias. First, even if neutrality or objectivity could be achieved, citizens with strong views on particular issues would not recognize it. Second, even if the news contained strong ideological or issue biases, people with a point of view (who are most likely to detect bias in the first place) would be well equipped to defend themselves against such biases. Indeed many nations favor a partisan press system as the best way to conduct public debates and to explore issues....

So, many Americans are caught up in dead end debates about a kind of news bias that is at once far less systematic and much less dangerous than commonly assumed. In the meantime, and this may be the greatest

irony of all, these preoccupations with the politics of journalists detract attention from other information bias that really are worth worrying about. A more sensible approach to news bias is to look for those universal information problems that hinder the efforts of citizens, whatever their ideology, to take part in political life.

The task [of this article] is to understand the U.S. public information system at a deeper level than the endless debates over ideological bias. Fortunately most of the pieces to the news puzzle are right in front of us. For all of its defects, the news continues to be largely a public production, with government press offices, media organizations, and popular tastes all available for inspection....

In turning to the workings of this system, it is important to understand that the news biases examined here have evolved over a long period of time. Their roots can be traced to the transition from a partisan to a commercial press in the 1800s.... It is thus helpful to think of the biases that we see at any point in time as historical products of the changing system of relations between people, press, and politicians. These relations continually shape and construct news and contribute to its evolving forms.

Four Information Biases That Matter: An Overview

Our expectations about the quality of public information are rather high. Most of us grew up with history books full of journalistic heroism exercised in the name of truth and free speech. We learned that the American Revolution was inspired by the political rhetoric of the underground press and by printers' effective opposition to the British Stamp Act. The lesson from the trial of Peter Zenger has endured through time: *the truth is not libelous*. The goal of the history book journalists was as unswerving as it was noble: to guarantee for the American people the most accurate, critical, coherent, illuminating, and independent reporting of political events. Yet Peter Zenger would probably not recognize, much less feel comfortable working in, a modern news organization.

Like it or not, the news has become a mass-produced consumer product, bearing little resemblance to history book images. Communication technologies, beginning with the wire services and progressing to satellite feeds and digital video, interact with corporate profit motives to create generic, "lowest-common-denominator" information formats. Those news story formulas often lack critical perspectives and coherent or useful organizing principles.... The illusions of coherence, diversity, and relevance have been achieved through packaging the news to suit the psychological tastes of different segments of the market audience. It is necessary to look beyond ideology and the packaging of our favorite news source in order to see the remarkable similarities that run through most mainstream news content. In particular, there are four characteristics of news that stand out as reasons why public information in the United States does not do as much as it could to advance the cause of democracy: *personalization, dramatization, fragmentation, and the authority-disorder bias*.

Personalization

If there is a single most important flaw in the American news style, it is the overwhelming tendency to downplay the big social, economic, or political picture in favor of the human trials, tragedies, and triumphs that sit at the surface of events. For example, instead of focusing on power and process, the media concentrate on the people engaged in political combat over the issues. The reasons for this are numerous, from the journalist's fear that probing analysis will turn off audiences to the relative ease of telling the human-interest side of a story as opposed to explaining deeper causes and effects.

It is easy for the news audience to react for or against the actors in these personalized human-interest stories. When people are invited to take the news personally, they can find a wide range of private, emotional meanings in it, however, the meanings inspired by personalized news may not add up to the shared critical and analytical meanings on which a healthy democracy thrives. Personalized news encourages people to take an

egocentric rather than a socially concerned view of political problems. The focus on personalities encourages a passive spectator attitude among the public. Moreover, the common media focus on flawed political personalities at the center of mistakes and scandals invites people to project their general anger and frustration at society or in their private lives onto the distant symbolic targets of politics. Either way, whether the focus is on sympathetic heroes and victims or hateful scoundrels and culprits, the media preference for personalized human-interest news creates a "can't-see-the-forest-for-the-trees" information bias that makes it difficult to see the big (institutional) picture that lies beyond the many actors crowding center stage who are caught in the eye of the news camera.

The tendency to personalize the news would be less worrisome if human-interest angles were used to hook audiences into more serious analysis of issues and problems. Almost all great literature and theater, from the Greek dramas to the modern day, use strong characters to promote audience identifications and reactions in order to draw people into thinking about larger moral and social issues. American news often stops at the character development stage, however, and leaves the larger lessons and social significance, if there is any, to the imagination of the audience. As a result, the main problem with personalized news is that the focus on personal concerns is seldom linked to more in-depth analysis. What often passes for analysis are opaque news formulas such as "he/she was a reflection of us," a line that was used in the media frenzies that followed the deaths of Britain's Princess Diana and America's John Kennedy, Jr. Even when large portions of the public reject personalized news formulas, as in the case of the year-long journalistic preoccupation with whether President Clinton's personal sexual behavior undermined his leadership, the personalization never stops. This systematic tendency to personalize situations is one of the defining biases of news.

Dramatization

Compounding the information bias of personalization is a second news property in which the aspects of events that are reported tend to be the ones most easily dramatized in simple "stories." As noted above, American journalism has settled overwhelmingly on the reporting form of stories or narratives, as contrasted, for example, to analytical essays, political polemics, or more scientific-style problem reports. Stories invite dramatization, particularly with sharply drawn actors at their center.

News dramas emphasize crisis over continuity, the present over the past or future, conflicts and relationship problems between the personalities at their center, and the impact of scandals on personal political careers. News dramas downplay complex policy information, the workings of government institutions, and the bases of power behind the central characters. Lost in the news drama (*melodrama* is often the more appropriate term) are sustained analyses of the persistent problems of our time, such as inequality, hunger, resource depletion, population pressures, environmental collapse, toxic waste, and political oppression. Serious though such human problems are, they just are not dramatic enough on a day-to-day level to make the news.

Important topics do come up, of course, such as when natural disasters strike, nuclear waste contaminates air or water supplies, or genocide breaks out in a distant land. Chronic conditions generally become news only when they reach astounding levels that threaten large-scale cataclysm through famine, depression, war, or revolution. But then the stories go away, again leaving the origins of and the solutions for those problems little-discussed in all but the biggest of stories. Most of these seemingly sudden "crises" are years in the making: deforestation that worsens flooding, neglected nuclear dumps festering in the Arctic or in Washington State, or bandit governments in African nations undermining the hope for civil society. With a steady flow of information provided by experts and issue advocacy organizations, these stories could be kept in the news as reminders to publics and politicians that there may be more important things than the glitzy media event of the day or the routine political skirmishing in Washington.

Crises, not the slow buildups to them, are the perfect news material, meaning that they fit neatly into the dramatization bias. The "crisis cycle" portrayed in the news is classic dramatic fare, with rising action, falling action, sharply drawn characters, and, of course, plot resolutions. By its very definition, a crisis is something that will subside on its own or reach dramatic closure through clean-up efforts or humanitarian relief operations. Unfortunately the crisis cycles that characterize our news system only reinforce the popular impression that high levels of human difficulty are inevitable and therefore acceptable. Crises are resolved when situations return to "manageable" levels of difficulty. Seldom are underlying problems treated and eliminated at their source. The news is certainly not the cause of these problems, but it could become part of the solution if it substituted illumination of causes for dramatic coverage of symptoms.

As in the case of personalization, dramatization would not be a problem if it were used mainly as an attention-focusing device to introduce more background and context surrounding events. Drama can help us engage with the great forces of history, science, politics, or human relations. When drama is used to bring analysis into mind, it is a good thing. When drama is employed as a cheap emotional device to focus on human conflict and travail, or farce and frailty, the larger significance of events becomes easily lost in waves of immediate emotion. The potential advantages of drama to enlighten and explain are sacrificed to the lesser tendencies of melodrama to excite, anger, and further personalize events. Thus the news often resembles real-life soap operas, only with far more important consequences than the ones on entertainment TV.

One of the things that makes the news dramatic—indeed, that may even drive news drama—is the use of visuals: photos, graphics, and live-action video. These elements of stories not only make the distant world seem more real, they make the news more believable. In many ways, particularly for television, the pictures may not only tell the stories but help editors and reporters decide which stories to tell and how to tell them. In principle, there is nothing wrong with the emphasis on sights in news production. In fact one might argue that thinking visually is the best way to engage the senses more fully in communicating about society and politics. Yet there is often a tension between not reporting important stories that are hard to picture and reporting possibly unimportant stories simply because they offer great visual images. . . . The economics of audience attention often shade editorial decisions in the direction of starting with the pictures and then adding the words.

It is important to worry about the bases of such editorial decisions because in many ways they distinguish between good and bad uses of news drama. When stories are selected more for visuals than for larger political significance and context, the scripting of the story may bend information rather badly to suggest that the pictures do, in fact, reflect the larger situation. And since there is more than a grain of truth to the old adage that "seeing is believing," people may be compelled to see aspects of society that simply are not there or that are not there in the ways they are dramatically portrayed in the news. The visually graphic coverage of crime on TV is an example of this. . . . At the very least, the selection of news stories primarily because they offer dramatic images is one of several important reasons why the news is often so fragmented or disconnected from larger political or economic contexts that would provide other ways to tell the story.

Fragmentation

The emphasis on personal and dramatic qualities of events feeds into a third information characteristic of the news: the isolation of stories from each other and from their larger contexts so that information in the news becomes fragmented and hard to assemble into a big picture. The fragmentation of information begins by emphasizing individual actors over the political contexts in which they operate. Fragmentation is then heightened by the use of dramatic formats that turn events into self-contained, isolated happenings. The fragmentation of information is further exaggerated by the severe space limits nearly all media impose for fear of boring readers and viewers with too much information.

Thus the news comes to us in sketchy dramatic capsules that make it difficult to see the causes of problems, their historical significance, or the connections across issues. It can even be difficult to follow the development of a particular issue over time as stories rise and fall more in response to the actions and reactions of prominent public figures than to independent reporting based on investigation of events. In addition, because it is difficult to bring historical background into the news, the impression is created of a world of chaotic events and crises that appear and disappear because the news picture offers little explanation of their origins.

The Authority-Disorder Bias

Passing for depth and coherence in this system of personalized, dramatized, and fragmented information is a fourth news tendency in which the authoritative voices of officials take center stage in many political news dramas to interpret the threatening and confusing events that threaten the order of social life. There is bias in placing so much news focus on the largely emotional questions of **Who's in charge?** and **Will order be restored?** (As opposed, for example, to *What is the problem?*, *Why is it a problem?*, *What are the alternative explanations beyond the official ones?*, and *What can citizens do to make the situation better?*)

It may be tempting to say that government, after all, is centrally about authority and order, so why shouldn't these concerns be central preoccupations of the news? The problem comes when journalists build themes about authority and order into the news as core dramatic emotional plot elements, rather than letting them pass through the news gates more formally when they arise in public debate, much the way partisan political views are generally reported. Instead, the focus on authority and order is often driven by considerations of what makes for bigger, more dramatic, more emotional stories.

Whether the world is returned to a safe, normal place, or the very idea of a normal world is called in question, the news is preoccupied with order, along with related questions of whether authorities are capable of establishing or restoring it. It is easy to see why these generic plot elements are so central to news: They are versatile and tireless themes that can be combined endlessly within personalized, dramatized, and fragmented news episodes. When the dramatic balance between order and disorder is not a plausible focus for an event, the news quickly turns the plot pair around and challenges authority itself, perhaps by publicizing the latest scandal charge against a leader or by opening the news gates to one politician willing to attack another.

In the past, it could be argued that the news more often resolved the authority-order balance in favor of official pronouncements aimed at "normalizing" conflicted situations by creating the appearance of order and control. A classic scenario of politics, according to political scientist Murray Edelman, is for authorities to take central stage to respond to crises (sometimes after having stirred them up in the first place) with emotionally reassuring promises that they will be handled effectively. Today's authorities still play out their parts, but the news increasingly finds ways to challenge either the pronouncements of officials or the presumption of order in society, or both. In short, the biggest change in portrayals of authority and order in the news ... is that the dominant news focus has shifted away from trusted authorities providing reassuring promises to restore chaotic situations to a state of order or normalcy. Such stories continue to appear, of course, but the growing news trend is to portray unsympathetic, scheming politicians who often fail to solve problems, leaving disorder in their wake.

What is the evidence for the proposition that news is more negative and less likely to paint reassuring pictures of the return to normalcy following dramatic crises and scandals?... For reasons having more to do with the news business than with external realities, the following changes have been charted in news content in recent years:

- increased levels of **reported** mayhem (crime, violence, accidents, health threats, freeway chases, and other images of social chaos)
- greater volume of criticism of government, politicians, and their policies, and less focus on the substance of policies
- higher journalistic tone of cynicism and negativity.

Many of these order-challenging news patterns are relatively subtle, reflecting the "hidden hand" of economic decisions within news organizations. For example,... the news recorded great increases in crime stories in the 1990s during a period in which officially reported rates of most violent crimes actually declined. This suggests that images of social disorder may be based on little more than choosing stories for their attention-getting effects. Images of disorder can be further amplified through subtle emphases in news writing. For example, is the traditional American family *threatened* by the increase in single-parent and two-working-parent households, or is the family in America simply *changing* in these ways as part of the normal course of social change?

The reason for thinking about authority and order as separable but related aspects of many news stories is that they are often set at odds with each other to create the dramatic tension in stories. Thus it would be too simple to say that authorities are almost always challenged and that disorder most often prevails. As news organizations take greater dramatic license with news plots, the two elements are mixed to achieve the greatest dramatic effect. A classic news plot represents authorities such as police, fire, and health officials as forces of good battling to restore order against social evils such as crime, violence, or disease. In one variation on this formula, crime or the latest health threat may seem to be running out of control, but officials appear in the news to tell us how we can be safe. Given the levels of mayhem and disorder in much of the news, the presence of at least some reassuring line of authority is a necessary dramatic counterpoint. Moreover, the question of what actually happened in a particular incident is often unclear at the time that news teams arrive. So we encounter the familiar news formula that goes: "The police aren't exactly sure what happened here yet, but their investigation is in progress, and we expect a report soon."

When authorities are anchoring a scene, dramatic speculation about levels of disorder may soar in news scripts. A typical example comes from a local newscast in Orlando, Florida, where Channel 6 announced an "exclusive" and promised a report from their "live truck" at the scene. The newscast opened with the anchor describing "A shocking scene in a Lake Mary neighborhood tonight. A home surrounded by crime-scene tape. A death police are calling 'suspicious.'" As the anchor spoke, the screen flashed the words "Neighborhood Shocker." Cut to the reporter live from the scene who further dramatized the death of a sixty-six-year-old woman by saying that police did not know what happened. As if to document this claim, the reporter interviewed a police officer who said that there were no signs of violence, forced entry, or robbery. Although this statement could easily have supported either an order or a disorder plot for the story, the local news format clearly favored playing the murder mystery/shocker plot. The reporter announced that the police planned an autopsy the next day and did not know what they would find. The live feed ended with the reporter saying that, in the mean time, they "want to keep a very tight lid on what happened.... Live in Lake Mary, Nicole Smith, Channel 6 News." The next day, it turned out that the *woman had died naturally of a heart attack*. So much for the "Neighborhood Shocker." As one observer noted, "Journalism Shocker" would have been a more appropriate on-screen warning.

By contrast, other dramatic plot formulas challenge authority either by focusing on alleged personal failings of politicians or by finding examples of government failures. The political poster story of the 1990s was about wasteful government spending. Many news organizations, both local and national, have run prominent features on "How government is wasting your tax dollars." The lure of such dramatic accounts over more representative news descriptions is illustrated in a *Los Angeles Times* investigative series on government spending

on computers in different agencies. Even though the investigation turned up many positive examples of taxpayer dollars well spent, here is how the story opened:

WASHINGTON After pumping \$300 billion into computer systems in the last two decades, the federal government has compiled a record of failure that has jeopardized the nation's welfare, eroded public safety and squandered untold billions of dollars.

Whether or not most events fit the authority-disorder plot, it is easy enough to make them fit. A news show with a regular feature on government waste will, of course, find some alleged example of waste every time the feature is scheduled. Also, since there are few features on good things the government is doing, examples of government thrift (other than those forced by budget cuts) are less likely to be news.

Consider the picture so far: Each day news consumers are bombarded by dozens of compartmentalized, unrelated dramatic capsules. Some emotional satisfaction can be derived from forming strong identifications with or against the actors who star in these mini-dramas. But what about facts? What about knowledge and practical information? Unless the consumer has an existing interest or perspective on the subject, recalling facts from the news resembles a trivia game played alone. Most people cannot remember three-fourths of the stories in a TV news broadcast immediately after watching it, and information recall about the remembered quarter is sketchy at best.

Communication scholars have developed considerable empirical support for these four information biases in the news. There is now a sizable literature that reads like an inventory of these problems. The tendencies toward personalization, dramatization, and fragmentation have all been remarkably enduring over time, although they may have become more exaggerated with the economic pressures of the business.... While the focus on authority and order is also an enduring defining feature of the news, the shifting balance from order to mayhem and the unreflectively negative tone toward officials has left many observers puzzled and concerned. Indeed many politicians say they have left government because of the relentlessly negative media scrutiny, while others have surrounded themselves by legions of media consultants and handlers. At the same time that many journalists criticize their own product in these terms, they confess being helpless to change it under the current system of profit- and ratings-driven business values.