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## Media and Politics

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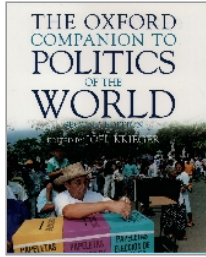
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# Media and Politics

## **Disciplines**

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## Media and Politics.

In contemporary discourse, the word “media” has multiple meanings. In one construction, media, the plural of medium, are the channels through which information is transmitted to an audience. In this sense, we speak of the medium of television or of print. The word is used in a second sense as well. In this definition, “the media” is a synonym for the press or reporters, the agents who are the custodians of the narratives that pass through the channel of the media in the form of news in its various forms.

The first sense of the word was central to an important decision of the U.S. Supreme Court which held that the candidates have an affirmative right of access to the broadcast media. The ruling, handed down in July 1981, was the result of a challenge by the Carter campaign to network denial of the right to purchase thirty minutes of prime time in December 1979. Writing for the Court, Justice Warren Burger argued that “it is of particular importance that candidates have the opportunity to make their views known so that the electorate can intelligently evaluate the candidates' personal qualities and their positions on vital public issues before choosing among them on election day” (*CBS Inc. v. FCC*, 453 U.S. 367, 1981).

The second sense was at play in the court decree on printing of the Pentagon Papers. When the Nixon administration went to court to try to stop the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* from publishing them, Justice Black wrote for the majority that

the Government's power to censor the press was abolished so that the press would remain forever free to censure the Government. The press was protected so that it could bare the secrets of government and inform the people. Only a free and unrestrained press can effectively expose deception in government. And paramount among the responsibilities of a free press is the duty to prevent any part of the government from deceiving the people and sending them off to distant lands to die of foreign fevers and foreign shot and shell.

In other words, Black found that the two newspapers were doing “precisely that which the Founders hoped and trusted they would do” (*New York Times Co. v. United States*, 403 U.S. 713, 717, 1971). This decision was rendered in the face of the Nixon administration's argument that publication would cause “the death of soldiers, the destruction of alliances, the greatly increased difficulty of negotiation with our enemies, [and] the inability of our diplomats to negotiate.”

Just as the Nixon administration found the Court decision on the Pentagon Papers problematic, so too some find the protections afforded broadcast political speech troublesome. For example, J.B. Stoner, a politician running for state office in Georgia in 1972, paid to air an ad that said in part that “the main reason why niggers want integration is because niggers want our white women.” The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) protested and asked the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to ban further airing. The FCC refused on the grounds that only a clear and present danger of imminent violence would justify tampering with a political commercial. The ruling was justified by the guarantee of free speech even for claims that are abhorrent (*FCC Won't Back Racist Ad in South*, *New York Times*, 4 August 1972, p.37). Independent presidential candidate Barry Commoner was also not stopped in 1980 from airing an ad that contained a word barred from entertainment programming: *bullshit*. Also, in 1972, presidential candidate Ellen McCormick was permitted to air an ad showing aborted fetuses that would not have been permitted to air had it not been considered protected political speech.

At one level, the media serve as a go-between, carrying the candidates' arguments to a larger audience than they could reach solely through interpersonal communication. On another, the media act as critical observers, examining politicians' records and proposals, and constructing narratives that help citizens make sense of the political world. In our focus on the second definition of media, we sometimes forget that some of the more important moments of our national life are a function of the existence of media as a channel. In the past four and a half decades, the number of nationally broadcast speeches by presidential candidates has dropped dramatically. A form that was once a staple of general elections has now all but disappeared from television although it survives in the form of the five-minute Saturday radio address by the president and response from a person from the opposing party. But where the public could come to know the party nominees through their nationally televised addresses in the 1950s, the 1960 campaign introduced a form that now constitutes the most watched event of the fall presidential season: the presidential debate. Although reporters have played some role, whether that of panelists or moderator, in each of the presidential general election debates, the bulk of the speaking time is the candidates'.

Debates are opportunities for politicians to distinguish their positions on issues by answering substantive questions about them. They are also a time for voters to compare the candidates. The media perform several roles in presidential general election debates by airing them live, covering them as news stories, and often providing the journalists who serve as questioners.

Taken together, the seven presidential elections containing debates have shown that they reinforce voters' perceptions more often than altering them, teach voters both about the candidates' positions on issues and character, and forecast the issue agenda of the future presidents as well as their communicative competence and habits of mind. However, post-debate press reports can alter the public's sense of who “won” and “lost” a debate and focus viewers and readers on tactical assessments rather than on a debate's substance.

Research since the first debates of 1960 has revealed fairly consistently that debates do not usually change votes. When change does occur, it is usually among those who were leaning to but not strongly committed to their candidate and those experiencing cross-pressures. In most elections, this is a small population; polling data suggest that most voters have usually decided how to vote before the first debate airs (Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Christopher Adasiewicz, *Debates in the United States, Televised Election Debates: An International Comparison*, London, 1998).

The news media can distort the electoral process in the way they cover the campaign in general and the debates in particular. By forecasting that there will be little to learn from debates and by stressing the staged nature of the events, reporters and pundits discourage viewership. By sidestepping a discussion of the candidates' similarities and differences on issues for post-debate speculation about who won or lost, who looked more presidential, and about supposed decisive moments, particularly gaffes, reporters diminish the likelihood that viewers will move what they learned from the debate from short-to long-term memory.

The way the press frames a campaign may influence the decision-making process of voters as well. Framing refers to selecting and emphasizing some aspects of a story over others. One of the most problematic tendencies of the press is its

focus on the strategy, or horse-race, aspects of campaigns rather than the issues being discussed. On average, studies show that about two-thirds of news articles about campaigns frame the news in terms of who is winning and losing instead of reporting and examining candidates' claims. A national survey on voters and media done by the Media Studies Center/Roper Center in September 1996 found 46 percent of respondents reporting that the media were paying too little attention to issues and 50 percent saying that there was too much attention being given to who's ahead and behind. The result is that campaigns end up being covered like sports or wars, with game and battle metaphors used to describe candidates and events. Candidates with good electoral prospects are "front-runners" while others are "long-shots"; politicians who are aggressive in a debate "came out with both guns blazing," and "hit a home run" or "scored a touchdown" if they "win" the debate and failed to "land a Hail Mary pass" or to "land a knockout blow" if they "lose."

The behind-the-scenes activities of politicians and their advisers become more important in such news stories than what the candidates are actually saying. For example, news reports are more likely to say that a candidate spoke at an auto factory in Detroit because she was courting the union vote than to describe what the candidate said and to examine her past record and comments about labor issues.

Polls are events only in the sense that they are created by the media and private organizations that conduct them, yet they are featured prominently in the coverage of electoral campaigns, either as aspects of larger stories or as the basis of entire reports. When they are about who is winning and who is losing at any given moment, polls lend themselves naturally to strategy frames. Poll-dominated news stories discourage reporting on candidates' proposals and instead lead to analyses of the politicians' plan to win.

The strategy frame focuses on conflicts between a front-runner and an opponent. As a result, in every presidential general election since 1960 reliance on news reports for information about the campaign would lead one to conclude that it contained a far higher level of attack than was in fact the case (Jamieson, Paul Waldman, and James Devitt, Mapping the Discourse of the 1996 US Presidential General Election, *Media Culture and Society* 20 [1998]: 323–338).

While strategy is an integral part of any campaign, overemphasizing this aspect of the electoral process at the expense of substantive discussion of issues and candidates' claims has undesirable effects on the way voters think about the political process (Joseph N. Cappella and Jamieson, *Spiral of Cynicism: The Press and the Public Good*, New York, 1997). People who read and watched news stories that focused on the strategy behind a mayoral race were more likely to make cynical judgments about the candidates and the election than were those exposed to stories that focused on candidates' stands.

Both strategy and issue frames increase political learning in audiences, especially in print news. In other words, reading about politics, regardless of the frame employed, teaches people something about a campaign. The question is, what does it teach? There are important differences between strategy and issue frames, particularly in television news. In the Cappella and Jamieson study, after a week's news audiences in both strategy and issue conditions were shown the same video of a debate among mayoral candidates. Those who had been exposed to broadcast and print strategy stories learned more strategy information from that debate, while those who watched and read stories focusing on issues learned more about candidates' positions. Print news appears to have a smaller effect on political learning than does broadcast news.

Strategy stories extend beyond campaigns to dominate other types of political news, such as that involving public policy matters. About two-thirds of stories about the 1994 health care reform debate in the United States used a strategy frame, a percent similar to election coverage. As in campaign coverage, strategy frames activated cynical evaluations of the public policy process in audiences. Although the health care reform debate involved a lengthy discussion featuring various philosophies about how best to provide health coverage to the uninsured, news stories focused predominantly on winners and losers, as well as on the motives of the key figures in the debate. As in the study of the mayoral race, audiences exposed to strategy stories about the health care debate were more likely to make cynical judgments after seeing a substantive videotaped discussion on the topic than were people exposed to issue-based stories. In this study, however, issue stories also activated cynicism. Importantly, those who read either kind were as poorly informed about the substance of the health care reform debate as were those in the control who read a single article on health care reform. The reporters'

focus on conflict minimized the likelihood that readers would understand the nature of the competing plans. Instead those in the study developed a generalized sense that the system was failing.

The news media's tendency to focus on strategy rather than substance in political reporting has a problematic effect on the way audiences think and learn about campaigns and policy debates. Strategically framed news highlights the self-interested motivations of the individual actors in the political process. By doing so, it leads people to focus on the negative, individuating aspects of politics rather than on more substantive concerns, and to then make negative attributions about both politicians and the political process.

While the way the news media frame a public policy discussion can affect the way the public thinks about politics, merely choosing to report on some policy matters and not others can influence the importance people attach to issues. Scholars call this "agenda setting," a reference to the way media encourage people to think about some issues merely by covering them more than others. Agenda setting posits both that the media tell us what to think about and also what not to think about. During the 1988 campaign, for example, neither the demise of the Soviet Union nor the savings and loan collapse became matters of candidate and public concern in large part because neither was a focus of press attention.

Many scholars have found strong correlations between the topics most frequently covered in the press and the issues people tell pollsters they think are the most important. For example, crime is covered more often than foreign policy; correspondingly, most people rank crime as one of the more important issues while foreign policy barely registers on the public opinion radar (at least in times of peace). In an important study of the 1968 campaign, McCombs and Shaw (1972) determined that the topics stressed in the press were very highly correlated with those the public thought were important.

It is not clear from survey-based agenda setting research, however, whether the media cause public agendas or whether there is another explanation. It could be that media and the public share agendas because some issues are more pressing than others, or because elites give these issues more attention. Time series analysis has strengthened the claim that reporting in the media is in fact producing the agenda setting effect.

Media attention to certain issues can also have an effect on policy makers. In a study of public policy issues in Congress, Martin Linsky found (*Impact: How the Press Affects Federal Policymaking*, New York, 1986) that the press exercised a greater effect on the *process* of policy making than the *content* of policy, speeding up decision making and, especially with negative coverage, pushing that decision making to higher levels of bureaucratic officials. In presidential politics, Michael Delli Carpini argues that the relationship between media coverage and governing is built simultaneously on conflict and cooperation and is increasingly institutionalized (*Critical Symbiosis—Three Themes on President-Pres Relations*, *Media Studies Journal* [Spring 1994]: 185–197). For example, reporters covering the president are based in a pressroom at the White House, where they file stories based on regular press conferences and press releases from the executive branch. Recognizing the importance of controlling the issue agenda, congressional leaders as well as White House occupants manipulate both the topics and the frames offered the press; reporters respond with increased wariness about those in power.

When the press focuses on some issues, these not only tend to become the most important in the minds of audiences, they may determine the subjects on which the public evaluates politicians. This effect, known as priming, suggests that if the press focuses on the economy, the public will judge policy makers based on their evaluations of the economy rather than on an issue that is covered less frequently. Thus, if a person thought the economy was in poor shape, she would tend to have an unfavorable opinion of the president. Priming does not predict whether the evaluation would be negative or positive, however, but simply that the ones that receive the most coverage will be the issues on which a politician is judged.

Media can then set the agenda, prime, and frame. The extent to which they are able to do so is a function of the political and media climate. For example, as the Gulf War experience shows, one reason approval ratings for the president climb during the buildup to a war is that other elite policy makers such as members of Congress (wherein rests, after all, the constitutional authority to declare war) are hesitant to criticize the president for fear of being perceived as unpatriotic or as usurping the president's prerogative to determine foreign policy. The result is a one-sided media environment in which the

president can define the crisis. Communication research has consistently shown that the media are most powerful in influencing public opinion when they present a one-sided message that comes from an influential source and conforms to a cultural or social norm, such as a need to rally in times of national crisis.

The public climate can also minimize the president's control of the agenda. When elite opinion—which could include both policy makers and the media—begins to coalesce around an opposing viewpoint, the two-sided tendencies of news will expose the public to counterarguments it may find persuasive. Public opinion can also turn when the media present negative evaluations of how the president (or any other policy maker) is handling a matter defined as a “crisis.”

These factors played out during the course of the Vietnam conflict. When President Lyndon Johnson made a de facto declaration of war against North Vietnam following the Gulf of Tonkin “incident,” few in Congress opposed his call for action. The public supported the Vietnam War in the beginning, but that support began to ebb as elite opinion leaders began questioning American involvement and media reports began providing evidence contrary to claims by the president and the military that the war was being won.

When it comes to coverage of political scandals, media influence on public opinion is less certain. The Monica Lewinsky scandal is illustrative. If the theories apply, the amount of coverage as well as its salacious nature should have produced priming and agenda setting. Instead, President Bill Clinton's job approval ratings recovered quickly from an initial drop and remained high even after a nationally televised speech in August 1998 in which he admitted he had misled the country about the affair.

Why didn't media preoccupation with the scandal have an effect on public assessments of Clinton's handling of the job of president, and why didn't it displace other issues in the public assessment of the problems facing the country? There appear to be two related explanations. Tracing the relationship between media coverage of the scandal and public approval ratings of the president, John Zaller argues that “bottom line” politics, meaning peace and prosperity, matter more to public judgment of a president than does media coverage of personal character (*Monica Lewinsky's Contribution to Political Science, PS: Political Science and Politics* [June 1998]: 182–189). Zaller shows, for example, that Clinton's approval ratings climbed several points after the State of the Union speech in which he trumpeted a series of accomplishments ranging from a strong economy to a balanced budget. Zaller argues that the public made an assessment that the president's personal peccadilloes mattered less than his ability to maintain national and economic security.

Another explanation of the media's inability to set the public agenda in the Lewinsky scandal is that people make a distinction between the public and personal lives of politicians, a distinction that the press doesn't necessarily grant. An examination of opinion polls from the first several months of the discussion shows that the public consistently drew a line between personal sexual behavior and conduct in office in evaluating Clinton (Jamieson and Sean Aday, *When Is Presidential Behavior Public and When Is It Private? Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 1998). Polls showed that people saw adultery as a private matter with majorities reporting they would be willing to look the other way if he lied about an affair under oath. But strong majorities said the president would lose their support if he encouraged others to lie under oath or participated in a conspiracy to hide illegal behavior. So while the press framed the story in large part as a sexual matter, the public appeared to draw the line at more job-related offenses. This is consistent with Zaller's argument that people are able to focus on substantive issues in a scandal despite the tenor of media coverage.

While coverage of the scandal may have had a limited effect on Clinton's job approval ratings, it still had the potential to affect the political process. In the Lewinsky case, Clinton's support among congressional Democrats suffered following his public admission that he misled people about the affair. In addition, it energized congressional Republicans who appeared ready to make the president's behavior an issue in policy debates and in mid-term elections. This could have had the effect of minimizing Clinton's ability to push legislation through Congress.

As a channel and a gatekeeper, the media play an important role in the political process. They provide the information citizens need to make evaluations of their elected representatives, and they can act as a channel between citizens and politicians. The press also acts as a check on government abuses by investigating and exposing the misuse of power. At the

same time, the way the media cover politics can be problematic. The tendency to utilize strategy rather than issue frames when reporting on campaigns and policy debates prevents the dissemination of substantive information and activates cynical judgments in audiences. By covering some issues more than others, the media also set the agenda for the public and for policy makers. In addition to this agenda setting effect, the media may prime audiences to evaluate politicians on frequently covered issues rather than less frequently reported ones. The press has similar effects on the public and on policy in times of crisis, fostering consensus when opposing viewpoints are scarce, but playing a role in turning public opinion by publishing negative evaluations of the way political leaders are handling the crisis.

(See also CENSORSHIP; ELECTIONS AND VOTING BEHAVIOR; INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY; PRESIDENCY, U.S.; PUBLIC OPINION; PUBLIC POLICY; SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES.)

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