9.4: Interest Groups in the Information Age

Learning Objectives

After reading this section, you should be able to answer the following questions:

1. How do interest groups interact with the media?
2. How do the media depict interest groups?
3. What are the consequences of these depictions?

Media Interactions

Many business interest groups try not to interact with the news media at all. They avoid media attention, particularly when it is likely to be negative. They prefer to pursue their policy preferences out of the media’s and the public’s sight and scrutiny.

Public Relations

Other interest groups have the need or the resources to strive for a favorable image and promote themselves and their policy preferences. One way is through advertising. They place advertisements on the television networks’ evening news shows in policymakers’ constituencies, such as Washington, DC, and New York, where opinion leaders will see them and in prominent newspapers, such as the New York Times, Washington Post, and Wall Street Journal. Even media outlets with tiny audiences may be suitable for advertisements. The Lockheed Martin Corporation has advertised in the policy-oriented National Journal in order to reach Washington insiders and policymakers.
Some interest groups engage in public relations campaigns. Walmart paid $10 million annually in order to counter lobbying groups that were funded by two unions. These unions were critical of the retail giant’s low wages, inadequate health care, and discrimination against women. The public relations campaign promoted the company’s positive activities and responded to criticisms (Goldberg, 2011).

Public relations is not confined to American interest groups. Approximately 160 foreign governments have US public relations consultants or lobbyists representing them in communicating with the US media, policymakers, and the public. The firms instruct their clients on how to deal with the media, arrange meetings for them with journalists, set up editorial briefings, pitch stories to reporters and editors, and try to create newsworthy events. These tactics usually succeed in increasing and improving the countries’ news coverage and images (Manheim, 1994; Manheim & Albritton, 1984; Choate, 1990).

Occasionally, the media expose this public relations activity. The New York Times revealed that, in part because fifteen of the nineteen terrorists involved with the attacks on 9/11 were Saudi Arabian, the Saudi “government has spent millions of dollars on well-connected lobbyists and national television advertisements since 9-11 in a drive to improve its image among Americans” (Marquis, 2011).

Advocacy Campaigns

A few interest groups engage in advocacy campaigns through the media. A notable example took place during the 1994 attempt by the Clinton administration to change the US health-care system. Some $60 million was spent on advertising, with opponents outspending supporters two to one.

The Health Insurance Association of America (now named America’s Health Insurance Plans), representing small to medium-sized insurance companies, waged the most effective public campaign. Under the appealing name of the Coalition for Health Insurance Choices, it spent around $14 million creating and showing television ads in which a woman (Louise) and her spouse (Harry) critically comment on alleged defects in the president’s health-care proposal. “Having choices we don’t like is no choice at all,” says Louise in one ad. No direct reference was made to the health insurance industry behind the ad.

The ads were aimed at members of Congress and thus aired mostly in Washington, DC, and on CNN. They attracted news coverage, which amplified awareness about, attributed influence to, and enhanced their effects. This attention increased even more when the Clintons made a parody version of the ad. By framing the administration’s proposal in terms of high cost and big government, the ads contributed to its defeat in Congress. It would not be until 2010 that reform of health care would be achieved, as discussed in Chapter 16 “Policymaking and Domestic Policies”.

Attracting Media Attention

Most interest groups do not engage in advocacy campaigns. Indeed, they lack sufficient funds to advertise at all. Yet coverage in the news media is essential, especially for many public interest groups, if they are to recruit members, raise funds, improve their access to policymakers, and obtain public support for their objectives (Schlozman & Tierney, 1996; Kollman, 1998). So they hold news conferences, issue press releases, release research studies, give interviews to journalists, and try to have their spokespeople appear on talk radio and television public affairs shows. Their problem is
that there are far more groups seeking news coverage than the media can or do accommodate.

Interest groups deploy several techniques to attract media coverage. Among them are the catchy phrase, the telling statistic, the scorecard, and the poll. Charlton Heston embodied the catchy phrase. While he was president and spokesperson of the National Rifle Association (NRA), he held up a musket during its annual meeting and told members that the only way he would give up his gun is when they pry it “from my cold dead hands.”

![Charlton Heston](https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Media_and_Politics/Book%3A_American_Mediated_Politics/Chapter_9%3A_Mass_Mediated_Politics/Figure_9.2(Charlton_Heston).

As its president, this hero of some of Hollywood’s greatest epics brought the NRA even more prominence, especially when he uttered his defiant phrase.

![Charlton Heston](https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Media_and_Politics/Book%3A_American_Mediated_Politics/Chapter_9%3A_Mass_Mediated_Politics/Figure_9.2(Charlton_Heston).

This media-attention-getting phrase became his trademark, which he repeated with other guns at subsequent conventions. They were the last words he uttered before he officially stepped down from the NRA’s presidency in 2003.

Another technique is the telling statistic. A report titled *City Slickers: How Farm Subsidy Checks End Up in Big Cities* from the Environmental Working Group achieved widespread and prominent publicity when it revealed that $1.2 million per year in agricultural subsidies was going to people living in the 90210 zip code, which is, as most Americans know from the television show of the same name, urban and affluent Beverly Hills (Cook et al., 2011). Because farm subsidies are traditionally justified as preserving and protecting family farms, the report persuasively reframed the issue as government subsidies of wealthy corporate farm interests (Berry & Wilcox, 2008).
Some interest groups issue scorecards that enable journalists easily to report how policymakers have voted on issues of concern to the group’s members and the public. The League of Conservation Voters has released a list to the press during election years of the “Dirty Dozen” members of Congress with the supposedly worst records on the environment. The legislators targeted are usually in close races and some 60 percent of them have been defeated.

Interest groups also pay for or conduct public opinion polls, sometimes with questions that frame the issue to push the public toward their point of view. During the California water shortage of 2001, the California Farm Bureau released a poll showing that 71 percent of those polled believed “that the federal government has a financial responsibility to help keep California’s farmers in agriculture production.” The actual question asked about “California family farmers” (the word “family” encouraged a positive response), the phrase “financial responsibility” is quite vague, and the 71 percent figure was achieved by adding the 44 percent “definite yes” response to the 27 percent “probably yes” response (California Farm Bureau Federation, 2001).

Disproportionate Coverage

Most news coverage of societal and public interest groups goes only to a few. According to an article by Lucig H. Danielian and Benjamin Page, “The media seize upon a few prominent individuals or groups to speak for broad sets of interests” (Danielian & Page, 1994).

Witness a study of 244 interest groups in fourteen major newspapers, two news magazines, and the top three television networks (Thrall, 2006). The single most-covered group in each of four policy areas received around 40 percent of all the coverage in that area. These were the Sierra Club on the environment, the Council on Foreign Relations on national security and foreign policy, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) for civil rights, and the Christian Coalition of America on broad matters of public policy. The figure reaches approximately 68 percent when the number of groups is raised to twelve (5 percent of the total number) to include the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Greenpeace, and a few others. In contrast, 34 percent of the interest groups did not appear in a single story.

The larger a group’s budget, the more likely it is to be covered. These groups have staff to communicate with the media, hold regular press conferences, provide the press with dependable information, stage events with dramatic visuals and symbolism, and make news by suing the government. They also are covered because reporters return repeatedly to sources that are familiar to them and their audiences.

Most news organizations are not inclined to incur the expense of investigating interest groups’ organization and claims of accomplishments. Nor are they able to obtain easy access to the groups’ records. For ten years, the Christian Coalition was the most prominent interest group of the religious right. Journalists took the claims of its leaders at face value. Only later did former national leaders who had left the group reveal to the press that the number of members had
been inflated (Goodstein, 1993).

Media Consequences

Media depictions matter. Favorable coverage of public interest groups seeking to protect the environment and consumers has helped get their issues on the policy agenda and some of their proposals enacted (Berry, 2000). The breast cancer lobby is far more successful at shaping media coverage and thus influencing public opinion and determining public policy (including government funding) than the prostate cancer lobby, even though the diseases have almost identical morbidity and mortality rates (Kedrowski & Sarow, 2007).

Disproportionate coverage of a few societal and public interest groups enhances their importance and the impression that each one represents a policy area. Instead, there is often a spectrum of interest groups across areas. Sparse or nonexistent coverage of these interest groups means that the media do not bring their demands, activities, and policy perspectives to the attention of policymakers and the public.

Unfavorable media depictions of labor unions reinforce their negative stereotypes. This coverage reduces public support for unions’ organizing efforts and discourages people from voluntarily joining unions. It discredits striking as a desirable or even appropriate way for unions to achieve their objectives.

Media coverage of business interest groups conveys their power. It limits this power by framing it as excessive and adverse to the public interest and by exposing some of it as greed and exploitation. This coverage affects public opinion. Of the people polled about “the power of different groups in influencing government policy, politicians, and policymakers in Washington” and which groups had “too much” influence, 86 percent selected “big companies,” 83 percent chose “political action committees which give money to political candidates,” and 71 percent picked “political lobbyists” (The Harris Poll, 2001). Overwhelmingly, people have the impression that government is run by a few big interests.[1] In November 2005, 90 percent of respondents to a Harris poll (up from 83 percent the previous year) said big companies had too much influence on government.

No wonder interest groups become issues in elections. Each party accuses the other of being beholden to “special interests” and of unsavory relationships with lobbyists. The media pursue stories about interest group contributions and of lobbyists holding prominent staff positions in candidates’ campaigns. Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama refused in the 2008 presidential election to accept contributions from registered lobbyists and political action committees (PACs). Republican nominee John McCain established a conflict-of-interest policy that resulted in the resignation or dismissal of several members of his campaign staff who were registered as lobbyists.

Key Takeaways

Interest groups use a variety of techniques to interact with the news media and obtain favorable coverage. These include advertising, public relations, and advocacy. Despite the vast number of interest groups in existence, the news media tend to cover the activities of only a few leading organizations. Media depictions of interest groups can have a significant impact on public opinion about them and support for or opposition to their policy preferences. The media often depict big business groups negatively, while they usually portray other groups such as environmental organizations more positively. The overall effect of the media’s depictions of interest groups is to give people the impression that
government is run by a few big interests.

Exercises

1. Why do you think some interest groups avoid media exposure? Why do others try to use the media to achieve their objectives?
2. Which interest groups do you view negatively? Which do you view positively? What do you think made you view those groups that way?

Civic Education

SAVE

Forming an interest group and keeping it going takes a strong commitment, but many young people have done just that. They recognize that there is power in numbers and that having a group of people unite behind a cause can be more effective than acting alone. Enterprising young people have established interest groups representing a wide range of causes and issues.

An example of a youth-focused interest group is the Student Association for Voter Empowerment (SAVE), a national organization of college students whose mission is to promote civic education in order to increase voter participation and help young people navigate the public policy process and interact with government. In addition to voter advocacy, SAVE lobbies government officials to pass legislation promoting jobs, health insurance, and college financial aid for young people. SAVE was founded by Kenyon College graduates Matthew Segal and Anna Salzberg and has over ten thousand members on campuses in fifteen states. The organization makes use of online media to facilitate its operations. Students wishing to start a chapter of SAVE on their campus can access online toolkit with directions for creating a constitution, building an organization, and becoming active. The organization provides information about key issues, advertises its activities, including conferences and outreach projects, facilitates communication among its members, and fundraises through its website. Group leaders also publish a blog on the Huffington Post. SAVE was instrumental in getting the House of Representatives to introduce the bipartisan Student Voter Opportunity to Encourage Registration (VOTER) Act of 2008, which requires colleges to take measures to register students to vote.

References


Cook, K., Clark Williams, Andrew Art, and Chris Campbell, *City Slickers: How Farm Subsidy Checks End Up in Big


