8.5: The Impact of the Media

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

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

In what ways can the media affect society and government? The media's primary duty is to present us with information and alert us when important events occur. This information may affect what we think and the actions we take. The media can also place pressure on government to act by signaling a need for intervention or showing that citizens want change. For these reasons, the quality of the media's coverage matters.

Media Effects and Bias

Concerns about the effects of media on consumers and the existence and extent of media bias go back to the 1920s. Reporter and commentator Walter Lippmann noted that citizens have limited personal experience with government and the world and posited that the media, through their stories, place ideas in citizens’ minds. These ideas become part of the citizens’ frame of reference and affect their decisions. Lippmann’s statements led to the hypodermic theory, which argues that information is “shot” into the receiver’s mind and readily accepted.[1]

Yet studies in the 1930s and 1940s found that information was transmitted in two steps, with one person reading the news and then sharing the information with friends. People listened to their friends, but not to those with whom they
disagreed. The newspaper’s effect was thus diminished through conversation. This discovery led to the **minimal effects theory**, which argues the media have little effect on citizens and voters.\[^2\]

By the 1970s, a new idea, the **cultivation theory**, hypothesized that media develop a person’s view of the world by presenting a perceived reality.\[^3\] What we see on a regular basis is our reality. Media can then set norms for readers and viewers by choosing what is covered or discussed.

In the end, the consensus among observers is that media have some effect, even if the effect is subtle. This raises the question of how the media, even general newscasts, can affect citizens. One of the ways is through **framing**: the creation of a narrative, or context, for a news story. The news often uses frames to place a story in a context so the reader understands its importance or relevance. Yet, at the same time, framing affects the way the reader or viewer processes the story.

*Episodic framing* occurs when a story focuses on isolated details or specifics rather than looking broadly at a whole issue. *Thematic framing* takes a broad look at an issue and skips numbers or details. It looks at how the issue has changed over a long period of time and what has led to it. For example, a large, urban city is dealing with the problem of an increasing homeless population, and the city has suggested ways to improve the situation. If journalists focus on the immediate statistics, report the current percentage of homeless people, interview a few, and look at the city’s current investment in a homeless shelter, the coverage is episodic. If they look at homelessness as a problem increasing everywhere, examine the reasons people become homeless, and discuss the trends in cities’ attempts to solve the problem, the coverage is thematic. Episodic frames may create more sympathy, while a thematic frame may leave the reader or viewer emotionally disconnected and less sympathetic.

Civil war in Syria has led many to flee the country, including this woman living in a Syrian refugee camp in Jordan in September 2015. Episodic framing of the stories of Syrian refugees, and their deaths, turned government inaction into action. (credit: Enes Reyhan)

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

Framing can also affect the way we see race, socioeconomics, or other generalizations. For this reason, it is linked to **priming**: when media coverage predisposes the viewer or reader to a particular perspective on a subject or issue. If a newspaper article focuses on unemployment, struggling industries, and jobs moving overseas, the reader will have a negative opinion about the economy. If then asked whether he or she approves of the president’s job performance, the
reader is primed to say no. Readers and viewers are able to fight priming effects if they are aware of them or have prior information about the subject.

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**Coverage Effects on Governance and Campaigns**

When it is spotty, the media’s coverage of campaigns and government can sometimes affect the way government operates and the success of candidates. In 1972, for instance, the McGovern-Fraser reforms created a voter-controlled primary system, so party leaders no longer pick the presidential candidates. Now the media are seen as kingmakers and play a strong role in influencing who will become the Democratic and Republican nominees in presidential elections. They can discuss the candidates’ messages, vet their credentials, carry sound bites of their speeches, and conduct interviews. The candidates with the most media coverage build momentum and do well in the first few primaries and caucuses. This, in turn, leads to more media coverage, more momentum, and eventually a winning candidate. Thus, candidates need the media.

In the 1980s, campaigns learned that tight control on candidate information created more favorable media coverage. In the presidential election of 1984, candidates Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush began using an issue-of-the-day strategy, providing quotes and material on only one topic each day. This strategy limited what journalists could cover because they had only limited quotes and sound bites to use in their reports. In 1992, both Bush’s and Bill Clinton’s campaigns maintained their carefully drawn candidate images by also limiting photographers and television journalists to photo opportunities at rallies and campaign venues. The constant control of the media became known as the “bubble,” and journalists were less effective when they were in the campaign’s bubble. Reporters complained this coverage was campaign advertising rather than journalism, and a new model emerged with the 1996 election.[4]

Campaign coverage now focuses on the spectacle of the season, rather than providing information about the candidates. Colorful personalities, strange comments, lapse of memories, and embarrassing revelations are more likely to get air time than the candidates’ issue positions. Candidate Donald Trump may be the best example of shallower press coverage of a presidential election. Some argue that newspapers and news programs are limiting the space they allot to discussion of the campaigns.[5] Others argue that citizens want to see updates on the race and electoral drama, not boring issue positions or substantive reporting.[6] It may also be that journalists have tired of the information games played by politicians and have taken back control of the news cycles.[7]

All these factors have likely led to the shallow press coverage we see today, sometimes dubbed *pack journalism* because journalists follow one another rather than digging for their own stories. Television news discusses the strategies and blunders of the election, with colorful examples. Newspapers focus on polls. In an analysis of the 2012 election, Pew Research found that 64 percent of stories and coverage focused on campaign strategy. Only 9 percent covered domestic issue positions; 6 percent covered the candidates’ public records; and, 1 percent covered their foreign policy positions.[8]

For better or worse, coverage of the candidates’ statements get less air time on radio and television, and sound bites, or clips, of their speeches have become even shorter. In 1968, the average sound bite from Richard Nixon was 42.3 seconds, while a recent study of television coverage found that sound bites had decreased to only eight seconds in the 2004 election.[9]
The clips chosen to air were attacks on opponents 40 percent of the time. Only 30 percent contained information about the candidate’s issues or events. The study also found the news showed images of the candidates, but for an average of only twenty-five seconds while the newscaster discussed the stories. This study supports the argument that shrinking sound bites are a way for journalists to control the story and add their own analysis rather than just report on it.

Candidates are given a few minutes to try to argue their side of an issue, but some say television focuses on the argument rather than on information. In 2004, Jon Stewart of Comedy Central’s The Daily Show began attacking the CNN program Crossfire for being theater, saying the hosts engaged in reactionary and partisan arguing rather than true debating. Some of Stewart’s criticisms resonated, even with host Paul Begala, and Crossfire was later pulled from the air.

The media’s discussion of campaigns has also grown negative. Although biased campaign coverage dates back to the period of the partisan press, the increase in the number of cable news stations has made the problem more visible. Stations like FOX News and MSNBC are overt in their use of bias in framing stories. During the 2012 campaign, seventy-one of seventy-four MSNBC stories about Mitt Romney were highly negative, while FOX News’ coverage of Obama had forty-six out of fifty-two stories with negative information. The major networks—ABC, CBS, and NBC—were somewhat more balanced, yet the overall coverage of both candidates tended to be negative.

Due in part to the lack of substantive media coverage, campaigns increasingly use social media to relay their message. Candidates can create their own sites and pages and try to spread news through supporters to the undecided. In 2012, both Romney and Obama maintained Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube accounts to provide information to voters. Yet, on social media, candidates still need to combat negativity, from both the opposition and supporters. Stories about Romney that appeared in the mainstream media were negative 38 percent of the time, while his coverage in Facebook news was negative 62 percent of the time and 58 percent of the time on Twitter.

Once candidates are in office, the chore of governing begins, with the added weight of media attention. Historically, if presidents were unhappy with their press coverage, they used personal and professional means to change its tone. Franklin D. Roosevelt, for example, was able to keep journalists from printing stories through gentleman’s agreements, loyalty, and the provision of additional information, sometimes off the record. The journalists then wrote positive stories, hoping to keep the president as a source. John F. Kennedy hosted press conferences twice a month and opened the floor for questions from journalists, in an effort to keep press coverage positive.
When presidents and other members of the White House are not forthcoming with information, journalists must press for answers. Dan Rather, a journalist for CBS, regularly sparred with presidents in an effort to get information. When Rather interviewed Richard Nixon about Vietnam and Watergate, Nixon was hostile and uncomfortable.\(^{[17]}\)

In a 1988 interview with then-vice president George H. W. Bush, Bush accused Rather of being argumentative about the possible cover-up of a secret arms sale with Iran:

Rather: I don’t want to be argumentative, Mr. Vice President.

Bush: You do, Dan.

Rather: No—no, sir, I don’t.

Bush: This is not a great night, because I want to talk about why I want to be president, why those 41 percent of the people are supporting me. And I don’t think it’s fair to judge my whole career by a rehash of Iran. How would you like it if I judged your career by those seven minutes when you walked off the set in New York?\(^{[18]}\)

Cabinet secretaries and other appointees also talk with the press, sometimes making for conflicting messages. The creation of the position of press secretary and the White House Office of Communications both stemmed from the need to send a cohesive message from the executive branch. Currently, the White House controls the information coming from the executive branch through the Office of Communications and decides who will meet with the press and what information will be given.

But stories about the president often examine personality, or the president’s ability to lead the country, deal with Congress, or respond to national and international events. They are less likely to cover the president’s policies or agendas without a lot of effort on the president’s behalf.\(^{[19]}\)

When Obama first entered office in 2009, journalists focused on his battles with Congress, critiquing his leadership style and inability to work with Representative Nancy Pelosi, then Speaker of the House. To gain attention for his policies, specifically the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), Obama began traveling the United States to draw the media away from Congress and encourage discussion of his economic stimulus package. Once the ARRA had been passed, Obama began travelling again, speaking locally about why the country needed the Affordable Care Act and guiding media coverage to promote support for the act.\(^{[20]}\)

Congressional representatives have a harder time attracting media attention for their policies. House and Senate members who use the media well, either to help their party or to show expertise in an area, may increase their power within Congress, which helps them bargain for fellow legislators’ votes. Senators and high-ranking House members may also be invited to appear on cable news programs as guests, where they may gain some media support for their policies. Yet, overall, because there are so many members of Congress, and therefore so many agendas, it is harder for individual representatives to draw media coverage.\(^{[21]}\)

It is less clear, however, whether media coverage of an issue leads Congress to make policy, or whether congressional policymaking leads the media to cover policy. In the 1970s, Congress investigated ways to stem the number of drug-induced deaths and crimes. As congressional meetings dramatically increased, the press was slow to cover the topic.
The number of hearings was at its highest from 1970 to 1982, yet media coverage did not rise to the same level until 1984. Subsequent hearings and coverage led to national policies like DARE and First Lady Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" campaign.


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

**Coverage Effects on Society**

The media choose what they want to discuss. This agenda setting creates a reality for voters and politicians that affects the way people think, act, and vote. Even if the crime rate is going down, for instance, citizens accustomed to reading stories about assault and other offenses still perceive crime to be an issue.

Studies have also found that the media’s portrayal of race is flawed, especially in coverage of crime and poverty. One study revealed that local news shows were more likely to show pictures of criminals when they were African American, so they overrepresented blacks as perpetrators and whites as victims. A second study found a similar pattern in which Latinos were underrepresented as victims of crime and as police officers, while whites were overrepresented as both. Voters were thus more likely to assume that most criminals are black and most victims and police officers are white, even though the numbers do not support those assumptions.

Network news similarly misrepresents the victims of poverty by using more images of blacks than whites in its segments. Viewers in a study were left believing African Americans were the majority of the unemployed and poor, rather than seeing the problem as one faced by many races.

The misrepresentation of race is not limited to news coverage, however. A study of images printed in national magazines, like *Time* and *Newsweek*, found they also misrepresented race and poverty. The magazines were more likely to show images of young African Americans when discussing poverty and excluded the elderly and the young, as well as whites and Latinos, which is the true picture of poverty.
Racial framing, even if unintentional, affects perceptions and policies. If viewers are continually presented with images of African Americans as criminals, there is an increased chance they will perceive members of this group as violent or aggressive. The perception that most recipients of welfare are working-age African Americans may have led some citizens to vote for candidates who promised to reduce welfare benefits. When survey respondents were shown a story of a white unemployed individual, 71 percent listed unemployment as one of the top three problems facing the United States, while only 53 percent did so if the story was about an unemployed African American.

Word choice may also have a priming effect. News organizations like the Los Angeles Times and the Associated Press no longer use the phrase “illegal immigrant” to describe undocumented residents. This may be due to the desire to create a “sympathetic” frame for the immigration situation rather than a “threat” frame.

Media coverage of women has been similarly biased. Most journalists in the early 1900s were male, and women’s issues were not part of the newsroom discussion. As journalist Kay Mills put it, the women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s was about raising awareness of the problems of equality, but writing about rallies “was like trying to nail Jell-O to the wall.” Most politicians, business leaders, and other authority figures were male, and editors’ reactions to the stories were lukewarm. The lack of women in the newsroom, politics, and corporate leadership encouraged silence.

In 1976, journalist Barbara Walters became the first female coanchor on a network news show, The ABC Evening News. She was met with great hostility from her coanchor Harry Reasoner and received critical coverage from the press. On newspaper staffs, women reported having to fight for assignments to well-published beats, or to be assigned areas or topics, such as the economy or politics, that were normally reserved for male journalists. Once female journalists held these assignments, they feared writing about women’s issues. Would it make them appear weak? Would they be taken from their coveted beats?

This apprehension allowed poor coverage of women and the women’s movement to continue until women were better represented as journalists and as editors. Strength of numbers allowed them to be confident when covering issues like health care, childcare, and education.

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

The media’s historically uneven coverage of women continues in its treatment of female candidates. Early coverage was sparse. The stories that did appear often discussed the candidate’s viability, or ability to win, rather than her stand on the issues.

Women were seen as a novelty rather than as serious contenders who needed to be vetted and discussed. Modern media coverage has changed slightly. One study found that female candidates receive more favorable coverage than in prior generations, especially if they are incumbents. Yet a different study found that while there was increased coverage for female candidates, it was often negative. And it did not include Latina candidates. Without coverage, they are less likely to win.

The historically negative media coverage of female candidates has had another concrete effect: Women are less likely...
than men to run for office. One common reason is the effect negative media coverage has on families. Many women do not wish to expose their children or spouses to criticism.

In 2008, the nomination of Sarah Palin as Republican candidate John McCain’s running mate validated this concern. Some articles focused on her qualifications to be a potential future president or her record on the issues. But others questioned whether she had the right to run for office, given she had young children, one of whom has developmental disabilities. Her daughter, Bristol, was criticized for becoming pregnant while unmarried. Her husband was called cheap for failing to buy her a high-priced wedding ring. Even when candidates ask that children and families be off-limits, the press rarely honors the requests. So women with young children may wait until their children are grown before running for office, if they choose to run at all.

When Sarah Palin found herself on the national stage at the Republican Convention in September 2008, media coverage about her selection as John McCain’s running mate included numerous questions about her ability to serve based on personal family history. Attacks on candidates’ families lead many women to postpone or avoid running for office. (credit: Carol Highsmith)

Summary

Writers began to formally study media bias in the 1920s. Initially, the press was seen as being able to place information in our minds, but later research found that the media have a minimal effect on recipients. A more recent theory is that the media cultivates our reality by presenting information that creates our perceptions of the world. The media does have the ability to frame what it presents, and it can also prime citizens to think a particular way, which changes how they react to new information.

The media’s coverage of electoral candidates has increasingly become analysis rather than reporting. Sound bites from candidates are shorter. The press now provides horse-race coverage on the campaigns rather than in-depth coverage on candidates and their positions, forcing voters to look for other sources, like social media, for information. Current coverage of the government focuses more on what the president does than on presidential policies. Congress, on the other hand, is rarely affected by the media. Most topics discussed by the media are already being discussed by members of Congress or its committees.

The media frame discussions and choose pictures, information, and video to support stories, which may affect the way people vote on social policy and in elections.
Practice Questions

1. How might framing or priming affect the way a reader or viewer thinks about an issue?
2. Why would inaccurate coverage of race and gender affect policy or elections?
3. If we are presented with a reality, it affects the way we vote and the policies we support.
4. In what ways can the media change the way a citizen thinks about government?
5. In what ways do the media protect people from a tyrannical government?
6. Should all activities of the government be open to media coverage? Why or why not? In what circumstances do you think it would be appropriate for the government to operate without transparency?
7. Have changes in media formats created a more accurate, less biased media? Why or why not?
8. How does citizen journalism use social media to increase coverage of world events?

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Media Matters (http://mediamatters.org/).

Media Research Center (http://www.mrc.org/).

PolitiFact ([http://www.politifact.com/](http://www.politifact.com/)).


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**beat** the coverage area assigned to journalists for news or stories

**cultivation theory** the idea that media affect a citizen's worldview through the information presented

**framing** the process of giving a news story a specific context or background

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

**minimal effects theory** the idea that the media have little effect on citizens

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

[hidden-answer]


20. Ibid.


34. Kim Fridkin Kahn and Edie N. Goldenberg. 1997. "The Media: Obstacle or Ally of Feminists?" In Do the Media...


38. Kahn and Goldenberg, "The Media: Obstacle or Ally of Feminists?"


