Supplement to Ch. 4

"The Communications Media"

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The History of Political Reporting in the United States

In the American colonies, the first printing press was put into operation during the 1630s. It was not until 1690, however, that the first newspaper appeared. This newspaper, published by Benjamin Harris, was named *Publick Occurrences Both Foreign and Domestick*. While Harris had been making a career in England and, at this point, in the colonies out of being a newspaper publisher, it became more common for printers--who were in the business of printing and selling books and circulars--to publish newspapers as an incidental activity of their printing businesses. As the eighteenth century proceeded, newspapers seemed to divide in the tone of their reporting, with some reporting approvingly about the British Crown and others expressing skepticism about the soundness of British colonial rule (Cochran, 1958, pp. 21-22).

By the mid-1750s, the creation of most newspapers was attributable to the publishers' deliberate decisions to circulate political opinions. Cochran states:

> During the latter half of the eighteenth century the press played an increasingly important part in influencing public opinion and in giving expression to it.

The press soon became an instrument of political influence. Colonial solidarity was aided in no small degree by the press, a notable example being the publication on May 9, 1754, in Benjamin Franklin's *Pennsylvania Gazette* of a cartoon depicting an eight-piece snake, each of whose segments was initialed for one of the colonies. Captioned "Join, or Die," this cartoon became the symbol of the need for united action.

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American newspapers now became the medium of expression for the controversies between England and the colonies, discussions being carried on largely through letters contributed by those upholding or denouncing British policies. The controversy centered in Boston, where Samuel Adams and other patriots, recognizing the power of journalism, used the *Boston Gazette* as their instrument of influence. The *Boston Chronicle* and the *Boston News-Letter* (the first continuously published American newspaper) were the channels used for opposing the colonial cause, an admission on the part of the Crown that public opinion was now a force to be considered. Of the 30-odd newspapers in the colonies when hostilities began in 1775, few remained neutral (Cochran, 1958, pp. 22-23).

After the successful conclusion of the Revolutionary War in 1783 and the productive Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787, newspapers took sides in advocating the positions of the Federalist faction and the Anti-Federalist faction, respectively. The *Pennsylvania Packet*, even before the Constitution was completed by the convention and released publicly, adopted a cheerleading role for ratification of the unfinished document. On July 19, 1787, the *Packet* reported this rumor:

> So great is the unanimity, we hear, that prevails in the Convention upon all great federal subjects, that it has been proposed to call the rooms in which they assemble--Unanimity Hall.

This kind of exulting and exaggerating was common in the press. On September 6, about 11 days before the convention completed its business, a *Packet* columnist imagined that the still-unfinished constitution would be offered to, but rejected by, the states. He described his scenario of the nation's resulting plight:

> His Excellency Daniel Shays has taken possession of the Massachusetts government and the former incumbents are to be executed tomorrow. New Jersey has petitioned to be taken again under the protection of the British Crown. . . .

In 1789, the year in which the Constitution went into effect, Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton hired John Fenno to publish the newspaper of Hamilton's faction, which within a few years would become the world's first political party, the Federalist party. Hamilton's newspaper was called the *Gazette of the United States*. In 1792, Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson countered by placing the poet Philip Freneau on the State Department's payroll, and assigning to him the job of editing the newspaper of Jefferson's faction, which soon would be the second political party, the Democratic-Republican party. Jefferson's newspaper was called the *National Gazette*. President George Washington viewed the growing competition of bombast with a jaundiced eye, fearing that journalists' penchant for stretching the truth would impede efforts to govern the new republic. Washington especially resented the *National Gazette*, which--though sponsored by his own appointee Jefferson--regularly denounced the policies of the Washington administration. At a Cabinet meeting, Washington became visibly irritated as he took note of the criticism to

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which he was regularly subjected, and he finally exploded, "*That rascal Freneau* sends me not one but *three* of his newspapers every day--as if I would distribute them for him!"

Into the Abraham Lincoln era, the American press continued to be dominated by newspapers that were the organs of the political parties. For example, the *St. Louis Democrat* could be expected to beat a Republican drum and the *St. Louis Republican* peddled the Democratic-party line. Meanwhile, the pioneers of the independent press in the United States began to establish newspapers that were free of political-party affiliations. Among the individuals who established independent newspapers or converted existing party organs into respected sources of daily news were James Gordon Bennett Sr., the *New York Herald*, 1835; Horace Greeley, the *New York Tribune*, 1841; Samuel Bowles Jr., the *Springfield*, Mass., *Republican*, 1844; Henry J. Raymond, the *New York Times*, 1851; Charles A. Dana, the *New York Sun*, 1868; William Rockhill Nelson, the *Kansas City Evening Star*, 1880; Joseph Pulitzer, the *New York World*, 1883; and William Randolph Hearst, the *San Francisco Examiner*, 1887, and the New York *Morning Journal*, 1895 (Cochran, 1958, pp. 24-25, 28-30).

The independent newspapers, though they were not official instruments of political-party propaganda, nevertheless positioned themselves as formidable instruments for shaping public opinion. William Randolph Hearst sought to promote war between the United States and Spain during the Cuban rebellion of the 1890s by printing stories about real and imagined Spanish brutalities. The U. S. government's Republican leaders did not want to be dragged into a war against Spain. Hearst sent a renowned artist, Frederic Remington, to Cuba to supply paintings of the conflict. From Cuba, Remington cabled Hearst, "Everything is quiet. . . . There will be no war." Hearst reportedly replied, "Please remain. You furnish the pictures, and I'll furnish the war." When the battleship USS *Maine* blew up in Havana harbor, enormous pressure was brought on President William McKinley and Congress to go to war. Congress declared war in 1898.

Newspapers specialized in what was called **yellow journalism** and **muckraking**—exaggerated accounts of government misconduct and corruption. (The term "yellow journalism" developed from a comic strip, the "Yellow Kid," in New York's *World* and *Journal* newspapers.) Cartoons depicted caricatures of party bosses. Thomas Nast--who is most famous for popularizing the Democratic donkey, the Republican elephant, and what is now recognized as the image of Santa Claus--drew cartoons to illustrate and exaggerate the deficiencies of party bosses such as William "Boss" Tweed in New York City. For the leaders of the political parties, this redirection of American journalism was costly to the authority that party officials possess. Instead of strengthening political parties by being instruments of the parties' linkage function, newspapers in the United States became strident critics of political parties and their leaders. When, in the early twentieth century, Robert M. La Follette Sr.'s Progressive reform movement advocated elimination of the power of political-party leaders meeting in "smoke-filled rooms" to determine party nominees for elected office, reporters and editors joined the clamor for the use of primary elections to make nominations. State laws transferring control of nominations from party officials to voters proliferated. Throughout

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the twentieth century, the newspapers' regular denunciations of the parties and their leadership contributed to the ongoing erosion of the parties' traditional functions and the party leaders' ability to manage coherent political organizations with which loyal adherents are affiliated.

At least as serious a blow to the significance of political-party officials in the American political system was the explosive growth in demand for television sets during the 1950s, as investors set up television stations in one city after another across the country. Nominees for office--whose campaigns had been managed almost exclusively by the national, state, and local party organizations--discovered that they could relate to the electorate by communicating directly through the medium of television. The victory of U. S. Sen. John F. Kennedy (D-Mass.) in the 1960 presidential election is undoubtedly attributable to voters' reaction to his charismatic persona as they watched him debate his rival, Vice President Richard M. Nixon. Twelve years later, Nixon, running for a second term as president, simply bypassed the Republican National Committee, establishing his Committee to Reelect the President and directing it to conduct his reelection campaign. Today, party nominees--almost all of them owing their nominations not to political-party officials but to the electorate--take little to no direction from party leaders. Much more important to them is how charming they appear to be when they have the coveted opportunity to appear on the NBC television network's weekly episode of *Meet the Press*.

The Communication Media's Impact on Campaigns, Government Institutions, and Elected Officials

Newspapers were meant to command some degree of uninterrupted attention from readers. Some readers would subscribe to a morning newspaper, and split their attention in reading the news only with the activity of eating breakfast. Other readers would subscribe to an afternoon newspaper, and sit in their parlors after dinner and discover what was on the minds of officials and opinion leaders.

Listening to the radio or watching the television was surely the forerunner of what we now call "multi-tasking." As a reporter reads the news, the telephone rings, dinner is served, and the children are made ready for bed. Therefore, the hallmark of radio and television news reporting has always been simplicity and brevity. The words, sounds, and images of broadcast news are fleeting; even if listeners and viewers try to concentrate, they will fail to absorb some of the words and names. Also, in terms of time duration, a radio or television news report will typically last no more than 30 minutes, less the amount of time necessarily set aside for commercial advertisements. Journalism professor Charles H. Brown once wrote:

> In comparison with the newspaper, both radio and television suffer because they lack completeness and comprehensiveness in their coverage. Both tend to skim the surface of the news. The typical radio and television news program gives only the highlights of an event, frequently only a half-minute or minute of time being devoted to the report. People

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> who want fuller details, and there are many of them, have to go to a newspaper.
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> . . . [T]he newspaper can be read anywhere and anytime. A radio or television newscast, once given, is gone forever. . . .
>
> The opportunities for being misunderstood are more numerous for radio and television than they are for the newspaper. The chief factor that leads to misunderstanding in spoken journalism is that the listener has only one chance to grasp the meaning. In reading the newspaper a person can go back over material and figure out the meaning of a word or sentence if it is not clear at first, but in listening to a broadcast a second chance is denied him (Brown, 1957, pp. 292-293).

As Americans' lifestyles have changed--for example, the role of "housewife" is essentially extinct--a frantic schedule has evolved, leaving little time for the luxury of reading a newspaper. The afternoon metropolitan newspaper is a thing of the past, and morning newspapers appear to be in their death throes. Increasingly, Americans are obtaining their news from the airwaves, cable, and the Internet, and sources of news are adapting to Americans' shortened attention spans. The result can be described as a theater of the absurd. A news report that cannot be accompanied by some kind of action-oriented video, like the president debarking from Air Force One, is unlikely to survive the final production meeting. In 1982, disgruntled CBS News reporters leaked the network executives' decision to convert the Tiffany Network's news program from serious news to "infotainment." Observers have complained that television reporters, given the choice between reporting the content of a candidate's well-thought-out speech about foreign affairs or presenting video showing the candidate trip on a step as he leaves the platform, will highlight the candidate's mishap.

Any hope that Ted Turner's invention of the 24-hour cable news channel--i.e., CNN ("Cable News Network")--would bring about more comprehensive coverage of political news has vanished as the cable news channels have become dominated by highly partisan, inflammatory commentary. The commentators--such as Glenn Beck, Sean Hannity, and Keith Olbermann--seek out viewers of the same ideological inclination, question the character of political rivals, and introduce panelists whose job (if they want to be invited back) is to entertain the viewers with overheated rhetoric. The result is not an informed electorate. Rather, the bombast creates a highly agitated, alarmed public that is highly suspicious of anyone who is trying to craft bipartisan solutions to pressing national problems. The president is under continuous, withering attack, which weakens his ability to persuade other policymakers to cooperate.

The Layout of News Reporting

There is supposed to be a separation between news and commentary in the non-party-controlled news media. The news pages (front page, Page 2, etc.) of a newspaper are supposed to be unbiased--free of opinion. Reporters are expected to conceal their

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personal ideologies, and to tell both sides of the story. They seek credibility, and fear the loss of it.

On the editorial pages, biased commentary appears in these forms:

- Editorials (written by the newspaper's editors).
- Commentaries by columnists (some of whom may be the newspaper's employees and others may be nationally syndicated). These columns are said to appear on the “op-ed” page (i.e., opposite the editorial page).
- Editorial cartoons (the cartoonist may be the newspaper's employee or may be nationally syndicated).
- Letters to the editor.

The same separation of fact and commentary is expected on television. The news reports by reporters are expected to be free of bias. However, commentators are allowed to offer biased commentary. For a while, it was routine for the word "COMMENTARY" to be flashed on the screen when a commentator offered opinions. More commonly today, the viewer is supposed to figure out for himself or herself which is fact and which is commentary.

The objective of unbiased reporting is a difficult one to achieve. For any story, there are many ways to package it. Government officials would gladly inundate reporters with information--some of it misleading--to slant the story in their favor. Representatives of the opposing party and critics among the public would gladly provide mountains of information to refute official positions. And if reporters merely parroted all of the data and quotations, this would not contribute toward educating anybody.

So reporters probably need to do "interpretive reporting," where they select "themes" for news stories and draw conclusions. This interpretive approach leaves reporters vulnerable to accusations that they have slanted the story.

Besides, the history of the news media in the United States reveals that journalists have always had an instinct to be adversaries to government officials. "Adversarial reporting" builds reputations for toughness and professional competence and commitment. Examples include these:

- CBS reporter Edward R. Murrow's investigative reporting and hostile interviewing of Senator Joseph McCarthy (R-Wisc.).
- CBS anchorman Walter Cronkite's critical reporting about Lyndon B. Johnson's Vietnam policy. When Cronkite, "the most trusted man in America," turned against the war effort and broadcast a documentary critical of the Johnson administration's policy, the president recognized the severe damage to his popular support.
- The exposé by *Washington Post* reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein that alerted the public about the break-in at Democratic national headquarters in the Watergate complex in Washington.
- CBS reporter Dan Rather's hostile questioning of President Nixon during news conferences while the Watergate investigation was in process.

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- ABC reporter Sam Donaldson's questions shouted at President Reagan to overcome the noise of Reagan's helicopters (noise that was deliberately planned by his aides to avoid unplanned interviews).

The challenge for the news media is to get people's attention. Ways of doing this include:

- "Scoops" (i.e., exclusive stories delivered before the rest of the news media has access to them). Some news programs display the words "Breaking News."
- Stories about corruption, especially government corruption.
- Stories with attractive, eye-catching visuals (*à la* CBS News' "infotainment" format).
- Stories about issues important to readers, listeners, or viewers (e.g., unemployment, high interest rates, etc.).
- Human-interest stories.

Television news departments struggle to find ways to "connect" with the viewing public. A few years ago, CBS anchor Dan Rather explained his philosophy of TV news reporting in a promotion for CBS News: "When I was a boy, my mother would tell me: `Stand up straight, look 'em in the eye, and tell 'em what you know.' And that's what we try to do on the *CBS Evening News*." As Holsworth and Wray (1987, p. 113) explain, television news reports require dramatization. Television news producers dread the "talking heads" format--which might be most informative. Instead, they demand that their correspondents provide film with action shots to illustrate their stories. Former CBS law reporter Fred Graham, confronted with the demand that he cooperate with the "infotainment" approach by submitting action shots rather than standing motionless in front of the Supreme Court building, opted to resign. How much action-shot material can one get to illustrate a Supreme Court decision? he wondered. Graham resorted to a short-lived career as a local television news anchor at a Tennessee station. He concluded that the medium does not lend itself to in-depth analysis of important news stories.

Criticisms of Journalists

TV NEWS BROADCASTS LACK DEPTH

Television news is low on content and high on visual "hoopla" (Yeric and Todd, 1989, pp. 55-56). In political campaigns, for example, great emphasis is placed on campaign events that involve good pictures. (Paid political advertisements have much more content about issue positions of candidates, sad as that may seem.)

The result is a stream of film based on so-called "photo opportunities," or "photo ops" for short. For example, in 1988 the Republican presidential candidate, Vice President Bush, got a lot of mileage by posing in front of a flag factory where he lambasted his opponent, Massachusetts Gov. Michael Dukakis, for vetoing an act of the Massachusetts state legislature that would have mandated the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance in public schools. Dukakis, in turn, posed on an Army tank, hoping to present himself as pro-military. The smiling, nonthreatening Dukakis riding on the tank reminded many viewers of

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the "Peanuts" comic strip character Snoopy, Charlie Brown's dog who fantasizes about waging air battles against the Red Baron. Bush's media advisors gleefully ran the film of Dukakis's pleasure trip on the tank over and over in their campaign advertisements.

Interviews with television news producers reveal their own understanding of their responsibilities and opportunities. Hertsgaard (1988, p. 63) quotes ABC's Jeff Gralnick: "We are a national front page, five days a week." CBS producers have acknowledged that their evening news offers little more than a "headline service." But the short bursts of information appeal to the short attention spans of viewers, whose viewing may be a few fitful minutes at a time interrupted by trips to the refrigerator or by incoming telephone calls or by the duties of caring for children.

The result, say Yeric and Todd (1989, p. 57) is that television viewers are less informed than non-viewers in many cases, especially among those who rely primarily on television news broadcasts.

A top-rated news show for years has been the CBS news division’s *60 Minutes*. This "newsmagazine" appears to be a hard-hitting critical analysis of misconduct by elites. But Holsworth and Wray have a novel way of explaining *60 Minutes* (1987, p. 123):

> When the list of actual investigations conducted by *60 Minutes* is examined, one finds that it is dominated by cases of small-time wheeler-dealers whom the establishment has always viewed with disdain: cigarette bootlegging, a fraudulent cancer clinic, rigged carnival games, fraudulent diamond sales, farmer worker exploitation in Louisiana, pitfalls of consumer credit, businesspeople conned into advertising in bogus publications, and phony sales of commodity options. These stories typify investigations of corruption and buttress the program's reputation for uncompromising analysis.
>
> This does not imply that these investigations have been misguided. It is always pleasurable to see scalawags, no matter how small, get their comeuppance. But surely one reason why a Mike Wallace can build a reputation as a tough-minded investigator is that he rarely challenges people who have significant power.

The show's executive producer, the late Don Hewitt, spoke candidly of "packaging reality the way Hollywood packages fiction" and describes the program as "a show about the adventures of four reporters" (quoted in Holsworth and Wray, 1987, p. 124).

Holsworth and Wray explain one reason for the failure of the show to get into provocative corporate issues: ". . . [O]ptimal programming decisions aim for increased audiences without disturbing any important potential clients [advertisers]." They continue (p. 104):

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> On one hand, there is the popular expectation, fortified by the public announcements of industry leaders, that news [should] not be fettered by outside influences. On the other hand, news organizations must be constantly aware of profit-and-loss issues."

Therefore, substantive reporting may be risky and unprofitable for networks.

TV NEWS EMPHASIZES PERSONALITIES OVER ISSUES

At one time, the news media tended to conceal information about the personal lives and indiscretions of public figures. The extramarital affairs of Franklin D. Roosevelt and John Kennedy were not reported. Press and VerBurg (1988, p. 24) report:

> Correspondent John Pierpoint of CBS writes that he and AP reporter Douglas Cornell accidentally became aware of such a Kennedy liaison. But in those days it was not the kind of story that would be reported.

The pendulum has swung to the other side. (One theory says that the much larger proportion of women who work in the Washington press corps explains the refusal to cover up extramarital affairs.) The fact that U. S. Sen. Thomas Eagleton (D-Mo.), nominated by the 1972 Democratic National Convention to be George McGovern's running mate, had sought psychiatric care some number of years earlier became a daily headline story until Eagleton withdrew. (The Democratic National Committee then replaced Eagleton with R. Sargent Shriver, former director of the Peace Corps.) In 1984, the news media hounded Democratic presidential candidate Walter F. Mondale's running mate, U. S. Rep. Geraldine Ferraro (D-N. Y.), about the finances of her husband John Vaccaro. In 1988, challenged by former U. S. Sen. Gary Hart (D-Colo.) who was campaigning in the presidential primaries, the *Miami Herald* took him up on his defiant suggestion that the newspaper's reporters carry out surveillance if they suspected him of marital infidelity. The *Herald* reporters staked out his apartment and identified model Donna Rice as an overnight visitor. A photograph of Rice sitting on Hart's lap on a boat called--unfortunately for Hart--the *Monkey Business* surfaced, sealing Hart's political fate. Vice President George Bush's 1988 running mate, U. S. Sen. J. Danforth “Dan” Quayle (R-Ind.), survived merciless questioning by the news media of his avoidance of Vietnam military service; reporters discovered that his family had pulled strings that secured a place for him in Indiana's National Guard. Quayle's struggle in debate with the older and more experienced Democratic candidate for vice president, U. S. Sen. Lloyd Bentsen (D-Tex.), provided a theme for journalists who incessantly questioned Quayle's intelligence and maturity. When Quayle challenged the portrait of families offered by Hollywood, and used the "Murphy Brown" character who bore a child out of wedlock as an example, Quayle was hooted down for failing to recognize the distinction between fiction and reality. Although the Bush-Quayle ticket triumphed in 1988, Quayle was battered throughout his term, the same ticket was defeated in 1992, and Quayle's aspirations for the presidency have been in abeyance. In 1992, the checkered past of Arkansas Gov. William J. “Bill” Clinton and his wife Hillary Rodham Clinton came to light early in the year; as had become the standard operating procedure, the news media commenced the embarrassing interrogation of Clinton and bombarded readers and viewers

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with information about Gennifer Flowers, who claimed to have had an affair. Many observers, including this author, wrote off Clinton's candidacy as an impossibility. Rather unexpectedly, public opinion proclaimed the history of Clinton's marital fidelity to be of no useful interest; the news media abandoned the story, and Clinton overcame the dire threat to become the nation's 42d president.

While annoyed public opinion virtually silenced the news media about Clinton's problems with "bimbo eruptions" (as his long-time aide Betsey Wright characterized the accusations), television and newspaper coverage of political campaigns continues to emphasize attributes of candidates rather than campaign issues. For example, in the evening after Candidate Jones sticks his foot in his mouth, the television news report is likely to revolve around film of Jones struggling to get into his car as reporters chase after him waving microphones in his face. While this image appears on the screen, the correspondent pretents to have the inside information that "Jones aides are worried that" the damage is somehow irreparable. Actually, the correspondent probably has *no* inside information, and Jones' apparent flight is probably more a reaction to the dogged hoard of reporters rather than to the imagined fear of facing the cameras.

One astute observer said that if a candidate were to deliver a thoughtful speech on foreign policy, but he tripped as he walked off the platform, the evening-news broadcast would show film of the candidate tripping on the stair. Decades ago, when reporters concealed Franklin Roosevelt's inability to walk because of polio, Roosevelt's aides dropped the president while carrying him into a meeting room. *Not one photograph was snapped!* In the 1970s, President Gerald R. Ford--a former college athlete and one of the most robust presidents in U. S. history--tripped on stairs a few times while debarking from Air Force One. The news media and the entertainment media (especially *Saturday Night Live* performer Chevy Chase) continuously portrayed Ford as clumsy. (Comedian Chase continues to live with the painful injuries that he sustained while repeatedly doing the pratfalls.) In Atlanta, soon after the International Olympic Committee awarded the 1996 summer games to the Georgia capital, a news conference was held at which the city's police chief, Eldrin Bell, fell off the stage while seated on a folding chair. The local news broadcasts that evening showed film of Bell falling off the stage, and then repeated it several times in *slow motion*.

In her study of the 1968 and 1972 presidential campaigns, Doris Graber found (according to Yeric and Todd, 1989, pp. 57-58):

> The ratio of issues to qualities was 44 to 56 percent in the press in 1968 and 36 to 64 percent in 1972. For 1972 television, it was 37 to 63 percent. The President as a man rather than his program was the center of attention.

Perhaps the bellweather of this trend was the 1960 televised debate between Kennedy and Nixon. Nixon had been enduring the effects of a knee infection, and his determination to campaign despite the knee problem led to the appearance of exhaustion. He looked worn out on the evening of the debate. The results were most

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unfortunate for Nixon, who--although he impressed the radio audience more than Kennedy did--looked older and possessed of less stamina than his opponent, although they were about the same age. The difference in Kennedy and Nixon's appearances probably led to Kennedy's victory.

Nixon's experience in the 1960 debate was repeated by Democratic candidate Walter F. Mondale's experience in 1984. Mondale (quoted by Tebbel & Watts, 1985, p. 552) lamented:

> Modern politics requires television. I think you know I've never really warmed up to television, and in fairness to television, it's never really warmed up to me. I don't believe it's possible anymore to run for President without the capacity to build confidence and communications every night. It's got to be done that way.

Political campaigns, as a result, ensure that television news broadcasts have plenty of meaningless photo opportunities to showcase the campaigns. Holsworth and Wray (1987, p. 132) write:

> Television trivializes politics. Instead of a process that resolves major issues confronting the nation, politics is reduced to a question of personal style. Candidate strategies, polls, candidate motives, and concrete events ["photo ops"--i.e., photo opportunities] are covered in minute detail while issue analysis goes begging. Short, snappy charges and countercharges of the candidates are reported, as are candidate errors. Personalities are emphasized. Politics, in short, becomes a spectacle, and all of us are reduced to watching.

Successful 1980 Democratic presidential nominee Jimmy Carter summarized the game extremely well when he wrote to his media advisor, GeraldRafshoon: "I'll always be grateful to have played a small part in the victory of the Rafshoon Agency."

This also applies to day-to-day operations of political officials and the news media. Ronald Reagan's spokesman, Larry Speakes, had a sign on his desk: "You don't tell us how to stage the news, and we don't tell you how to cover it." No doubt, Speakes understood the success of the stubborn strategy. Page and Shapiro (1992, p. 380) wrote: "Presidents, who regularly complain about negative media, receive overwhelmingly positive coverage. . . ."

It should be pointed out that the news organizations' focus on personality in political contexts carries over to an emphasis on emotionalism over substance in nonpolitical stories. Reuven Frank, the late executive producer of *NBC Nightly News*, said: "The highest power of television journalism is not in the transmission of information but in the transmission of experience. Joy, sorrow, shock, fear--these are the stuff of news" (quoted in Press and VerBurg, 1988, p. 80). Frank's formulation is consistent with the traditional

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proverb of journalism that it's not news when a dog bites a man, but it *is* news when a man bites a dog.

Somewhat peculiarly, even the *reporters'* personalities seem to be thought of now as matters of interest. Local television stations now feature their news anchors, sports reporters, weather reporters, and other reporters on their promotions for their stations, often portraying these on-air personalities as warm, friendly, and eager for personal contact with viewers. The Rev. Norman Vincent Peale wrote in a *TV Guide* article (quoted in Holsworth and Wray, 1987, p. 106):

> Many aspects of television strike me as very positive, but few more than the way people on TV become cherished friends to millions of people. . . . Somehow this seems particularly true late at night. It's then that people most need a friend. . . . TV generally is to be commended for the kind of people it presents. I don't know Tom Brokaw personally, for instance, but I like him. He's got a good face and a calm, friendly style. . . . [While I was recently travelling to Washington, D. C.,] my train stopped in Baltimore and I was looking at all those red brick houses. . . . [E]very one of those houses had an antenna on top, reaching up and symbolically saying, 'Come into my house.'"

Holsworth and Wray respond (on p. 127): "Peale takes great comfort in the fact that millions of people regard Tom Brokaw as a `cherished friend.' He ought to be dumbfounded, for this is on the same level as someone describing a `relationship' with an inflatable doll."

PROBLEMS WITH OBJECTIVITY

The First Amendment to the Constitution guarantees "freedom of the press." The courts have interpreted this as expansively as possible, especially for newspapers, drawing the line only at libel and grotesque pornography (obscenity). With respect to radio and television, the Federal Communications Commission had a "Fairness Doctrine," but abandoned it in the 1980s, so that almost anything can be broadcast. Very rarely does the FCC intervene; only an apparent sociopath like New York radio's Howard Stern will arouse the FCC sufficiently to take adverse action.

This means that newspapers, radio, and television can legally slant the news as they please. The rule for readers, listeners, and viewers is *caveat emptor*--buyer beware. Government makes no certification as to the accuracy or reasonableness of the contents.

Some readers, listeners, and viewers express concern for the accuracy, fairness, and objectivity of the news they receive. Media critics act as "watchdogs" to expose prejudicial news reports.

Conservative Republicans are virtually unanimous in claiming that the news media are biased toward progressive Democrats. Sean Hannity insists as much on a regular

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basis. The conservatives' accusations are supported by surveys showing that most reporters are Democrats (or, at least, vote Democratic most of the time). From 1968 to 1980--a period when Republican candidates won three out of four presidential elections--80 percent of leading reporters and editors voted Democratic (Press & VerBurg, 1988, p. 94).

Everett Carll Ladd Jr. and Seymour Martin Lipset, in *The Divided Academy: Professors and Politics* (1975, pp. 2-3), explained:

> Another sphere of activity in which the elite show clear signs of being influenced by ties to the university world is the mass media; the people who write for major newspapers, magazines, and news services, and who direct network broadcasting, have values and political orientations similar to academics. It may be argued that those who have risen to prominent positions in the media seek acceptance as intellectuals and along with theologians look to faculty as a primary reference group. A. James Reichley of *Fortune* has described this development in the outlook of journalists:
>
> "Since World War II the old reporters of the *Front Page* school, whose attitudes were at least as much anti-intellectual as anti-government, have gradually disappeared. The new journalists have tended to be better educated and more professional--and strongly influenced by prevailing currents of opinion in the academic community. The part played by the Ivy League in the intellectual establishment has no doubt been exaggerated, but it is worthy of note that almost one third of the nation's most influential journalists who are not college graduates . . . operate in a milieu in which liberal intellectual attitudes are pervasive. The suggestions of one critic that many national journalists now function as a kind of `lesser clergy' for the academic elite is `not far from correct.'"

Progressive Democrats dispute the conservatives' accusations, and argue that the news media are biased in the opposite direction. They cite the ownership by wealthy corporate owners who are threatened by progressive, anti-business, pro-regulation politics. Editorial-page sentiment was quite favorable to Nixon in 1972 and to Reagan in 1980 and 1984. New-left activists charge that the news is written to discredit the radical left and those who lead progressive social movements. Instead, the news favors *status-quo* policy approaches. The press glorifies most foreign-policy adventures and rarely exposes imperialistic initiatives of the U. S. government. Walter Cronkite was a cheerleader for the NASA space program when social activists were questioning it as a budget priority. And, clearly, the news media treated Reagan with great deference--to the joy of his media advisors (Hertsgaard, 1988, p. 3).

These perspectives can be reconciled. Reporters, for the most part, serve to the people what they want to read and hear. Page and Shapiro (1992, p. 346) state that television news commentary is an indicator for other contemporary influences on public

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opinion and may simply track the climate of opinion in the country as a whole. They also state (pp. 341-342) that the news media are aware that people prefer to receive news from politically compatible sources.

> When it comes to political analysis, most people delegate most of the work to people they trust as like-minded agents.

So reporters show preference for popular candidates. Reagan's 1984 opponent, Walter Mondale, recalls viewing television news reports in which he was featured, and thinking to himself, "I would have voted against the fool, too."

Furthermore, reporters have a natural attraction for attractive or charismatic personalities. They gravitated toward Kennedy and Reagan alike. According to Press and VerBurg (1988, p. 97), Stephen Hess calls this "style bias." He observes that reporters prefer a Kennedy or a George F. Will to a Jimmy Carter or a Gerald R. Ford. "It is possible for a `liberal' press to be anti-George McGovern and pro-William Buckley."

Another question about media bias ought to be addressed here: Do reporters systematically undercut government officials? A story disseminated by Reid Irvine's right-wing Accuracy in Media organization tells of a Cuban editor who was interviewed after Fidel Castro came to power in January 1959. Miguel Angel Quevedo, editor of the Cuban magazine *Bohemia*, reflected on the part that he and his fellow journalists had played in Castro's triumph over the regime of Fulgencio Batista after a 5½-year revolt. Quevedo lamented that Cuban journalists had worn the "hateful uniform of systematic oppositionists." Regardless of who was president of the Cuban republic, Quevedo explained, he "had to be attacked" and "he had to be destroyed." A few months after giving the interview, Quevedo committed suicide.

Vice President Spiro T. Agnew had similar observations about the news media in a memorable speech--entitled “On the National Media”--that he delivered in Des Moines, Iowa, on November 13, 1969. Agnew complained that every televised speech by the president was followed by so-called "instant analysis" by news commentators in which they would criticize what the president had just said even before the viewers were able to digest the speech. Once the president concluded his speech, his image would fade from the screen to be replaced by the image of some three to five network commentators who would proceed to question everything from the president's integrity to his sanity. Agnew observed that the spontaneity of the analysis was patently phony, recalling the confusion into which the commentators were thrown on the evening in 1968 that President Johnson announced unexpectedly that he would not seek reelection. Agnew's speech seemed to hit its mark; the era of "instant analysis" abruptly ended.

Presidents find this sort of treatment to be humiliating. As Nixon complained: "Scrubbing floors and emptying bedpans has as much dignity as the presidency." President Reagan's spokesman, Larry Speakes, criticized the American news media for the "steady denigration of the president [that] has gone on for two decades."

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In 1977, Michael Robinson wrote:

> . . . [T]he network news has emerged as "the loyal opposition" more so than even the party out of office. *It is now the networks that act as the shadow cabinet*.

In 2011, the cable-news commentators whose ideological affiliation differs from that of the president subject him to daily rhetorical bombardment, portraying him as inept and insincere.

Surely, this confrontational approach is consistent with the history of the free press in the United States. Still, some critics object that the news media are not confrontational enough--that the news media parrot government officials without critical analysis. Only the appearance of scandal mobilizes the press.

<u>Impacts of Journalists</u>

The impacts that journalists have are as follows:

- Political campaign coverage signals to voters which campaign events are most important. By emphasizing events and reporting them repeatedly, the news media signal the public that the events are important. The news media relegate other events to the background (Yeric & Todd, 1989, p. 60).
- The news media do not create basic attitudes, but they may activate attitudes. Patterson says that political candidates are aware of the invulnerability of most basic attitudes: "Even the candidates seldom try to overturn basic attitudes, but work instead to create perceptions that they feel will elicit those attitudes beneficial to their candidacies" (quoted in Yeric & Todd, 1989, p. 60).
- Television news creates *short-term* changes in public opinion. It does not account for instantaneous or glacial changes in public opinion (Page & Shapiro, 1992, p. 344).
- Editorials have much more influence on public opinion that news reports have. ". . . We have been surprised by the remarkably strong estimated impact of news commentary. . . . We found a large effect of editorial columns" (Page & Shapiro, 1992, p. 345).

Press and VerBurg (1988, p. 62) state that editorial endorsements are most effective when any of these conditions applies:

-- The newspaper's position already fits readers' predispositions.

-- Voters' ties to both major political parties are weak.

-- Voters have few other cues or guidelines (especially in nonpartisan elections, referenda, or long ballots).

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- People who follow national politics entirely on television are significantly more *confused and cynical* than those who use other media as well (Press & VerBurg, 1988, p. 92).
- The less knowledge the public has prior to a media report, the more likely it is to be affected by it (Yeric & Todd, 1989, p. 61).
- Television may have a more significant effect on public opinion than newspapers do when the subject is dramatic and the event is short-term (Yeric & Todd, 1989, p. 61).
- Leaders and experts communicate with each other through news commentaries (Page & Shapiro, 1992, pp. 364-365).
- The news media place some issues on the agenda of public policy. "Advocacy journalism" is influential in this context. Problems like child abuse and spousal abuse, which might have been ignored for centuries, can be brought to the public's attention by television more effectively than by any other information source.

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