CHAPTER 9
Media and Politics

CHAPTER OUTLINE
I. The Rise of the Media
   A. The Early Days
   B. The Broadcast Media
   C. Diversity and Concentration
   D. Government Regulation
II. Making News
III. The Effects of the Mass Media
   A. Setting the Agenda
   B. Conducting Politics in the Media: Old and New
IV. The Uneasy Alliance Between Government and the Media
   A. Covering the President
   B. Covering Congress
   C. Covering the Courts
V. Conclusion: The Great Manipulator?

CHAPTER SUMMARY
We all depend on the media for information about what is happening in politics. Some people catch only an occasional television news report or newspaper headline, whereas the most informed follow broadcast news programs carefully and read several newspapers and political journals. As we learned in Chapter 5, the public’s ideas about politics and government are extensively influenced by the media. The media have transformed modern politics, changing our relationship to government and the ways we select our leaders, the kind of political leaders we have, and the ways our government functions. The relationship between the media and politics, one of the most important topics of our day, raises many of the most controversial questions. Is the modern influence of the media healthy? Do we get the “straight story”?

This chapter responds to those questions and others about the role of the media, especially television, in modern American politics. Preview the major topics in Chapter 9 to see what is ahead. “The Rise of the Media” describes the evolution of the press and broadcast media as a force in American politics. As you read, you should consider a fundamental question: The media bring us the “news,” but what is news. How does the proliferation of blogs and Internet access change the type of news coverage we get? Much of the controversy over the effects of the mass media stems from this question.

That controversy has given rise to the myth of media manipulation, which holds that television, radio, and the press dominate public opinion about politics, controlling what we know and what we think. Is this the whole truth about the effects of the media? Do they manipulate public opinion?

Apart from the media’s influence on the American public, the media also have a profound effect on politicians and the conduct of politics. The last part of this chapter, therefore, explores the complex and uneasy alliance that exists between government and media in this country. Each needs the other and each uses the other, but conflict is inevitable, and that tension creates the framework for more myths about the media and politics. Who can we believe? Are the media acting as a mirror that truthfully
reflects everything about the reality of politics, or is there distortion and deception, as critics of the media charge? Or is that distinction too stark? Do the media create the reality of politics by focusing attention on particular issues while ignoring others? The answer to these questions, in the authors’ conclusion, provides some very important insights into the realities of American government in this age of the mass media.

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

After carefully reading and studying the chapter, you should be able to:

1. Explain the *myth of media manipulation* and evaluate its accuracy.
2. Summarize the origins and development of American mass media, including the *penny press* and *yellow journalism*.
3. Explain who controls American newspaper and broadcast networks and evaluate the significance of recent challenges to TV network dominance.
4. Describe how the media are regulated in the United States and discuss the significance of the *equal-time rule*.
5. Summarize the criteria used by the media to determine what is newsworthy.
6. Identify the influences of the mass media on public opinion and the political agenda.
7. Describe how the conduct of politics has been altered to meet the needs and opportunities of media coverage, including the new reality of *pseudo-events*, the *new media*, and the horse-race coverage of political campaigns.
8. Describe the relationship between government and the mass media, explaining elements of both conflict and cooperation in the uneasy alliance between the press and government officials.
9. Explain and illustrate the relationship between the presidency and the mass media, including the role of the presidential press secretary and the White House press corps.
10. Summarize why Congress is more difficult to cover than the president and explain why the courts are the least covered of the government institutions.
11. Describe the growing role and influence of blogs and the Internet on the media’s coverage of American political events.
12. Explain the differences between episodic coverage and thematic reporting.

**READING MYTHS AND POLITICS & POPULAR CULTURE**

1. What role do you see for blogs to play in the coverage of American politics. Will they continue to exist as independent entities or simply as arms of the major media outlets?
2. Can fake news shows and entertainment segments be a reliable source of political information?
3. Television and movies often portray reporters as investigators—is that an accurate portrayal?

**REVIEWING CHAPTER 9**

**Identifying Key Terms and Ideas**

*Fill in the following terms and definitions in the appropriate blanks:*

1. The first generation of newspapers with mass popular appeal, appearing in the mid-1800s, was called the_____.
2. ____ a. priming
2. The style of news reporting that utilizes bold headlines, illustrations, and color features to promote stories of scandal and corruption is called _____.

3. Political speeches, rallies, and personal appearances staged simply to produce media coverage may be called _____.

4. The federal government’s rule requiring that broadcasters who allow one political candidate to campaign on the station must provide equal opportunity to all candidates for the same office is the _____.

5. The capacity of the media to isolate particular issues, events, or themes in the news as the criteria for evaluating politicians is called _____.

6. Live, on-the-scene reporting of an issue that focuses on the individual is known as _______.

7. Unlike episodic coverage this type of reporting puts a story in a larger, more abstract context.

Understanding Facts and Concepts

True/False: If any part of the statement is incorrect, mark it False and write in the reason(s) why the statement is false.

1. T  F  Liberals and conservatives agree that there is bias in the media, but they disagree about the nature/direction of the bias.

2. T  F  Television became a major source of political news for most Americans during World War II.

3. T  F  Network news programs rose to prominence in the 1950s and are still the major source of political information for most Americans.

4. T  F  Franklin Roosevelt’s fireside chats were the first political efforts to use television to reach millions of Americans.

5. T  F  The news media in the United States are more closely regulated than are the media of most other democracies.
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15. T F Media owners have recognized the potential power of the Internet and have expanded their holdings into this new area.

16. T F The fact that there are a lot of diverse media outlets means that there is a diversity of opinion about politics available to the informed.

17. T F Contemporary media have contributed to the blurring of the distinction between news and entertainment.

18. T F FCC regulation of the media requires that broadcasters who permit a candidate for political office to campaign on the station must allow equal time and identical rates to all other candidates for the same office.

19. T F Politicians are not very attuned to the media.

20. T F Events are more likely to be news if they involve famous people.

21. T F The media’s power to change established political beliefs is limited because people exercise selective exposure, absorbing only information that agrees with their existing beliefs.

22. T F Broadcasters who permit a candidate for political office to campaign on the station are not required to allow all other candidates for the same office equal time at identical rates.

23. T F Bloggers may have fans that login to read their materials, but these stories do not make it into the mainstream media.
24. T F Compared to the executive and legislative branches, the judiciary gets considerably less media attention.

25. T F Generally, campaigns are structured in America to ensure media exposure for their candidates.

PREPARING FOR AN EXAM

Multiple-Choice Questions

Circle the letter of the correct answer.

1. If your friend argued that Americans’ ideas about the death penalty were determined by what we have been told on TV news, this would be an example of
   a. the mirror-to-society myth.
   b. the myth of majority opinion.
   c. the myth of media manipulation.
   d. a realistic view of media influence.

2. Although some people charge the media with manipulating public opinion, defenders argue that the media
   a. control American political values.
   b. only reflect the attitudes and values of the public.
   c. accurately report all the news about the government.
   d. are dominated and manipulated by the government.

3. Sensationalism in the press, called yellow journalism, characterized major newspapers
   a. when the New York Times dominated the scene.
   b. at the time of the Spanish-American War.
   c. at the time that television news programming began.
   d. before the New York Sun began publishing.

4. Which of the following statements most accurately reflects the FCC issuing of broadcast station licenses?
   a. The mandate giving the FCC this power is vague.
   b. Most applications for license renewal are denied.
   c. All license agreements must be approved by Congress.
   d. Lobbying plays no role in the process.

5. When did television become the main source of political news for most Americans?
   a. as soon as the television networks began broadcasting
   b. during the World War II broadcasts of Edward R. Murrow
   c. following the 1976 Carter-Ford presidential debates
   d. following the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon presidential debates
6. Which of the following is accurate evidence of the trend in media competition in the United States?
   a. a decline in competition among urban newspapers
   b. a decline in the growth of newspaper chains
   c. a decline in the number of cable TV news channels
   d. a decline in competition for print journalism from television

7. The dominance of television network news in the United States has recently been challenged by
   the
   a. public’s disbelief in the truth of TV news.
   b. increase of yellow journalism in the press.
   c. growth of cable television news.
   d. FCC enforcement of the equal-time doctrine.

8. The equal-time rule requires broadcasters to
   a. provide equal access for all candidates for a political office.
   b. provide equal time for opinions opposing the station’s editorials.
   c. give equal access to local and national news personalities.
   d. give equal time to sports and politics.

9. In 2008 Fred Thompson announced his candidacy for president. Why did NBC subsequently pull
   episodes of Law and Order, in which he appeared, from their broadcast schedule?
   a. NBC was supporting John McCain and didn’t want to help their opponent.
   b. NBC was afraid that other candidates might demand equal time to counter Thompson’s
      appearances.
   c. They got angry letters from Democrats.
   d. The FCC made them stop or face a fine.

10. Selective exposure is the
    a. Supreme Court practice of refusing interviews with the press.
    b. media practice of reporting only on the superficial aspects of an election campaign.
    c. effort of the White House to limit the exposure of the president to harsh criticism.
    d. tendency of people to accept only information that agrees with their existing beliefs.

11. To promote and shape the press coverage of their proposals, presidents send out members of the
    administration to give policy speeches. This approach is described as
    a. needful self-promotion.
    b. grandstanding.
    c. end-run promotions.
    d. going public.

12. Which of the following items are used to determine if a story is newsworthy?
    a. Is the story timely and novel?
    b. Does the story involve any violence, scandal, conflict, or disaster?
    c. Are there people connected with the story to interview?
    d. All of the above.

13. A president who authorizes a press leak to see if his proposal will be embraced or attacked has
    released a(n)
    a. ego leak.
    b. goodwill leak.
    c. trial balloon.
    d. whistleblower leak.
14. Pseudo-events are an indication that the media
   a. cannot be relied on to tell the news as it really happens.
   b. have great power to set the political agenda.
   c. influence the conduct of politicians.
   d. manipulate public opinion.

15. When the television news program runs a broadcast segment that is a live, on-the-scene, news story that focuses on the victims of a terrorist attack, it is best described as
   a. thematic reporting.
   b. yellow journalism.
   c. episodic coverage.
   d. penny journalism.

16. Why were nonprofit radio stations largely replaced by commercial broadcasters?
   a. Their low ratings resulted in their licenses being stripped.
   b. Media conglomerates bought them out.
   c. The Federal Radio Commission reasoned that because nonprofits were not motivated by profit, they would not serve the public interest.
   d. A large-scale petition drive demanded that radio broadcasters play more popular music and programs.

17. Whereas the media cover every action of the president, the main interest of the White House is to
   a. get its message across through the media.
   b. help the media report the truth.
   c. keep away from the media.
   d. censor the media.

18. Some leaks to the press are
   a. trial balloons planted by the White House.
   b. approved by the president.
   c. damaging to the president.
   d. all of the above.

19. Why doesn’t network television seem to report news about Congress as extensively as it reports news about the president?
   a. Congress has a bad reputation for reporting false information.
   b. Congress has no single personality to capture media attention.
   c. More is happening at the White House than in Congress.
   d. The president avoids coverage and so creates more curiosity about what he is doing.

20. Which of the following comments best expresses the reality about the mass media’s influence on American political opinion?
   a. The mass media have complete power to shape American public opinion.
   b. Americans are not selective or critical about what the media tell them about politics.
   c. The media influence what Americans think about as news more than their opinions on issues.
   d. The media do not influence what Americans think is important in politics.

21. The FCC rule that broadcasters who permit one candidate to campaign on the station must allow all other candidates to do the same at the same rates is referred to as the
   a. fairness rule.
   b. fixed campaign rate rule.
   c. opportunity clause.
   d. equal-time rule.
22. In 2007 Ron Paul raised $6 million in one day for his presidential campaign by
   a. hosting a telethon.
   b. going on a hunger strike.
   c. having people donate via his website.
   d. orchestrating a nationwide cell-phone call campaign.

23. Thematic reporting encourages the viewer to
   a. locate the responsibility for the event at the level of social forces.
   b. focus on the role of the individuals in the event.
   c. change the channel.
   d. pay closer attention to the advertising.

24. Television has typically encouraged candidates to transform their opinions into very short statements, usually 10 seconds or less, which are called
   a. sound bites.
   b. press conferences.
   c. press releases.
   d. political commentary.

25. The birth of the mass media in America can be traced back to the
   a. use of radio broadcasts.
   b. television coverage of political debates.
   c. creation of the penny press.
   d. proliferation of blogs.

26. Which of the following is not one of the new strategies that candidates have for circumventing the established media?
   a. Internet web pages
   b. video news releases
   c. late-evening entertainment programs
   d. press conferences

27. Events staged to produce media coverage, often staged against a suggestive background, are referred to as
   a. priming.
   b. the equal-time rule.
   c. yellow journalism.
   d. pseudo-events.

28. Yellow journalism is often cited as having a role in
   a. creating regional splits that led to the American Civil War.
   b. sparking massive westward migration.
   c. promoting the start of the Spanish-American War.
   d. setting new standards of excellence in journalism.

29. The federal government organization that oversees television and radio is the
   a. Federal Communications Commission.
   c. Central Intelligence Agency.
   d. Federal Bureau of Investigation.

30. Most of the political media coverage in America is directed at
   a. the Supreme Court.
   b. Congress.
   c. the president.
   d. federal agencies.
Essay Questions
1. Discuss the myth of media manipulation, contrasting the evidence that supports it with the evidence that suggests it is a distortion of reality.
2. Trace the rise of the mass media in the United States, describing the important stages in the development of both the print and broadcast media in relation to American politics.
3. Journalists have claimed that they simply report all the news as it happens. What do they actually report? Discuss the criteria that the media use to determine what is news.
4. What options do presidents have for ensuring that their message will get to the public in the fashion they want?
5. Do you agree with Justice Brennan’s assertion that the Court’s opinions “must stand on their own merits without embellishment or comment from the judges who write them or join them.” Discuss why the Court should be treated differently or the same as the other branches of government.
6. What do political scientists mean by an uneasy alliance between government and the media? Discuss the relationship of the two, describing the needs and interests of each.

ANSWER KEY

Reading Myths and Politics & Popular Culture
1. While there is still a great deal of autonomy attached to blogs, they are increasingly becoming part of the mainstream media’s approach to news coverage. Major news networks have their own blogs that they promote, and increasingly the biggest blogs are taking on advertisers to pay for their expenses.
2. Political satire requires a certain degree of knowledge to appreciate the humor. Presented as a fake news show, there is little danger in misinterpreting the intent of a show like Jon Stewart’s Daily Show. However, when news is packaged like a news report, but the source and funding are not properly attributed, it is more troubling as to its value. (See the example regarding FEMA’s simulated news conferences in response to the wildfires in California.)
3. Less than 1 percent of the stories reported on local television are the result of reporter-instigated investigations.

Identifying Key Terms and Ideas
1. b
2. c
3. d
4. e
5. a
6. f
7. g

Understanding Facts and Concepts
1. True.
2. False. That was not true until after the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon presidential campaign debates.
3. False. Network news shows now trail local news and cable shows as the source of political information for most Americans.

4. False. The fireside chats were broadcasts made on radio before television was invented.

5. False. American news media are freer from regulation than are the media of most other democracies.

6. True.

7. False. The availability of people to interview is more important.

8. True.

9. False. The fairness doctrine has disappeared, but the equal-time provision remains current law.

10. True.

11. True.

12. False. The press secretary’s main job is to get the president’s message across to the media.

13. False. During this time period, these networks have lost approximately 30 million viewers.

14. True.

15. True.

16. False. Ownership of media outlets is highly concentrated, which significantly limits diversity of opinion.

17. True.

18. True.

19. False. Politicians are more attuned to the media than is the public.

20. True.

21. True.

22. False. The FCC requirements stipulate that broadcasters who permit a candidate for political office to campaign on the station must allow all other candidates for the same office equal time at identical rates.

23. False. Reporters routinely follow bloggers in search of potential stories.

24. True.

25. True.

**Multiple-Choice Questions**

1. c

2. b

3. b

4. a

5. d

6. a

7. c
Essay Questions

1. Describe the myth of media control and address the following points.
   - Expanse of American consumption of media
   - Concentration of media ownership
   - Government regulation
   - Newsworthiness

2. The rise of the American media.
   - Before the 1830s, the press was specialized for limited audiences.
   - Yellow journalism of the late nineteenth century.
   - Development of broadcast media.
   - Radio began as an entertainment medium.
• Politicians, like Franklin Roosevelt, understood its political possibilities.
• CBS began serious radio broadcasting.
• Television also began as an entertainment medium.
• After the 1960s, Americans began to depend on television for news.
• Concentration of media ownership.
• About two-fifths of all daily papers belong to just twelve chains.
• The three major television networks are all owned by large publishing-entertainment conglomerates.
• New media.
• Cable.
• Internet.

3. Because no medium can carry everything that happens, how is news selected?
• Determined according to criteria
• Breaking stories
• Violence, conflict, disaster, and scandal
• Famous people
• People to interview

4. Presidents have a number of options. You may want to talk about the following areas:
• Going public
• Creating pseudo-events
• Issuing trial balloons
• Creating video news releases (VNRs)
• Appearing on alternative formats—Larry King, David Letterman, etc.
• Holding press conferences
• Posting original documents (speeches, reports) on the Internet for everyone to access

5. Answers will vary. In making your arguments, consider the unique nature of judicial proceedings versus legislative or executive work. Be sure to examine the matter of their appointment to the post versus popular election.

6. Although government officials and journalists are sometimes locked in combat, at other times, their goals overlap and cooperation is necessary.
• Journalists need politicians to obtain information.
• Politicians need journalists to maintain public exposure.
• Journalists keep politicians informed.
• Portrayal of presidents.
• Everything the president does is treated as news.
• The White House goes to great lengths to present its views to the press.
• Press conferences are highly controlled opportunities for presidential communication.
• Leaks to the press are a source of strain between presidents and the press.