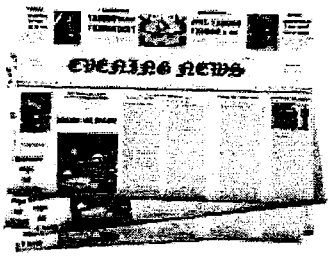
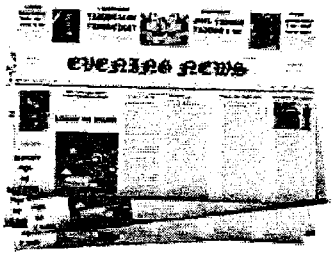
Advanced Placement American Government

Unit VI: The Media

Wilson (Ch12)





Monday 11/06 **Americanism and Government Test- (20 points towards Test/Quiz Category)**

Tuesday 11/07 **No School:** Teacher Professional Day

Wednesday 11/08 **Quiz 269-280 (Open Book)/Political ideologies-Bring unit 5 packet to discuss. Compass Test?**

Thursday 11/09 **Answers due to set of summary questions found at the end of:** ***"The Mass Media: Free and Independent?"*** by Parenti in Ciglar/Loomis, p. 254. **Class Discussion** of article and **Media Bias** Activity.

Friday 11/10 **Begin Video: Kill the Messenger: Make Connections with Parenti article.**

Begin Feeding Frenzy: Focus questions: Why is the media called a feeding freny? Why does the media challenge a candidate's character, even if it is a rumor or rumors? What connections can you make to Primary colors?

Monday 11/13 **Critical Review Due: Feeding Frenzy. Video: Kill The Messenger.**

Tuesday 11/14 **Quiz over Ch12, pp. 280 - 292.** (Open Book)
Video: ***Kill the Messenger.***
Focus question: What is the inside story? How did Mass Media attempt to cover it up? Was the behavior of the mass media and its corporate ownership to be expected? Connect to Parenti article.

Wednesday 11/15 **Video:** ***Kill the Messenger***

Thursday 11/16 **AP Multiple Choice Test.** Units IV, V and VI. (Chapters 7-12)

Note Cards Due-5 Bonus Points

Friday 11/17 **AP Format Essay Test.** Two required essays, 45 minutes

10

The Media

I. Reviewing the Chapter

A. Chapter Focus

In this chapter you will examine the historical evolution and current status of relations between the government and the news media—how the media affect government and politics and how government seeks to affect the media.

After reading and reviewing the material in this chapter, you should be able to do each of the following:

1. Describe the evolution of journalism in American political history, and describe the differences between the party press and the mass media of today.
2. Demonstrate how the characteristics of the electronic media have affected the actions of public officials and candidates for national office.
3. Describe the effect of the pattern of ownership and control of the media on the dissemination of news, and show how wire services and television networks have affected national news coverage. Discuss the influence of the national press.
4. Describe the rules that govern the media, and contrast the regulation of electronic and print media. Describe the effect of libel laws on freedom of the press and of government rules on broadcasters.
5. Assess the effect of the media on politics, and discuss why it is difficult to find evidence that can be used to make a meaningful and accurate assessment. Explain why the executive branch probably benefits at the expense of Congress.
6. Describe the adversarial press and how reporters use their sources. Describe how an administration may develop tactics to use against the adversarial press.

B. Study Outline

I. Journalism in American political history
   A. The party press
      1. Parties created and subsidized various newspapers
      2. Circulation was small, newspapers expensive, advertisers few
      3. Newspapers circulated among political and commercial elites
   B. The popular press
      1. Changes in society and technology made press self-supporting and able to reach mass readership
         a. High-speed press
         b. Telegraph
         c. Associated Press, 1848; objective reporting
         d. Urbanization allowed large numbers to support paper
         e. Government Printing Office—end of subsidies in 1860

2. Influence of publishers, editors created partisan bias
   a. "Yellow journalism" to attract readers
   b. Hearst foments war against Spain
3. Emergence of a common national culture

C. Magazines of opinion
1. Middle class favors new, progressive periodicals
   a. *Nation, Atlantic, Harper's* in 1850s and 1860s on behalf of certain issues
   b. *McClure's, Scribner's, Cosmopolitan* later on
2. Individual writers gain national followings through investigative reporting
3. Number of competing newspapers declines, as does sensationalism
4. Today the number of national magazines focusing on politics accounts for a small and declining fraction of magazines

D. Electronic journalism
1. Radio arrives in 1920s, television in 1940s
2. Politicians could address voters directly but people could easily ignore them
3. But fewer politicians could be covered
   a. President routinely covered
   b. Others must use bold tactics
4. Recent rise in talk show as political forum has increased politicians' access to electronic media
   a. "Big Three" networks have made it harder for candidates by shortening sound bites
   b. But politicians have more sources: cable, early morning news, news magazine shows
   c. These new sources feature lengthy interviews
5. No research on consequences of two changes:
   a. Recent access of politicians to electronic media
   b. "Narrowcasting," which targets segmented audiences
6. Politicians continue to seek visuals even after they are elected
7. New era of electronic journalism emerging

II. The structure of the media

A. Degree of competition
1. Newspapers
   a. Number of newspapers has not declined
   b. Number of cities with multiple papers *has* declined
      (1) 60 percent of cities had competing newspapers in 1900
      (2) 4 percent in 1972
2. Radio and television
   a. Intensely competitive, becoming more so
   b. Composed mostly of locally owned and managed enterprises, unlike Europe
   c. Orientation to local market
   d. Limitations by FCC—widespread ownership created

B. The national media
1. Existence somewhat offsets local orientation
2. Consists of
   a. Wire services
   b. National magazines
   c. Television networks
   d. Newspapers with national readerships
3. Significance
   a. Washington officials follow it closely
   b. Reporters and editors different from local press a distinctive group
      (1) Better paid
      (2) From more prestigious universities

(3) More liberal outlook
(4) Do investigative or interpretive stories

4. Roles played
   a. Gatekeeper: what is news, for how long
      (1) Auto safety
      (2) Water pollution
      (3) Prescription drugs
      (4) Crime rates
   b. Scorekeeper: who is winning, losing
      (1) Attention to Iowa, New Hampshire
      (2) Gary Hart in 1984
   c. Watchdog: investigate personalities and expose scandals
      (1) Hart's name, birth date, in 1984; Donna Rice in 1987
      (2) Watergate (Woodward and Bernstein)

III. Rules governing the media
   A. Newspapers versus electronic media
      1. Newspapers almost entirely free from government regulation
         a. Prosecutions only after the fact and limited: libel, obscenity, incitement
      2. Radio and television licensed, regulated
   B. Confidentiality of sources
      1. Reporters want right to keep sources confidential
      2. Most states and federal government disagree
      3. Supreme Court allows government to compel reporters to divulge information in court if it bears on a crime
      4. Myron Farber jailed for contempt
      5. Police search of newspaper office upheld
   C. Regulation and deregulation
      1. FCC licensing
         a. Seven years for radio
         b. Five years for television
         c. Stations must serve "community needs"
         d. Public service, other aspects can be regulated
      2. Recent movement to deregulate
         a. License renewal by postcard
         b. No hearing unless opposed
         c. Relaxation of rule enforcement
      3. Other radio and television regulations
         a. Equal time rule
         b. Right of reply rule
         c. Political editorializing rule
      4. Fairness doctrine was abolished in 1987
   D. Campaigning
      1. Equal time rule applies
         a. Equal access for all candidates
         b. Rates no higher than least expensive commercial rate
         c. Debates formerly had to include all candidates
            (1) Reagan-Carter debate sponsored by LWV as "news event"
            (2) Now stations and networks can sponsor
      2. Efficiency in reaching voters
         a. Works well when market and district overlap
         b. Fails when they are not aligned
         c. More Senate than House candidates buy TV time

IV. The effects of the media on politics
   A. Studies on media influence on elections
      1. Generally inconclusive, because of citizens'
         a. Selective attention
         b. Mental tune-out

2. Products can be sold more easily than candidates
3. Newspaper endorsements of candidates
   a. Often of Republicans locally, whereas Democrats endorsed nationally
   b. But worth 5 percent of vote to endorsed Democrats

B. Major effect is on how politics is conducted, not how people vote
1. Conventions scheduled to accommodate television coverage
2. Candidates win party nomination via media exposure
   a. Estes Kefauver
3. Issues established by media attention
   a. Environment
   b. Consumer issues
4. Issues that are important to citizens similar to those in media
   a. TV influences political agenda
   b. But people less likely to take media cues on matters that affect them personally
5. Newspaper readers see bigger candidate differences than do TV viewers
6. TV news affects popularity of presidents; commentaries have short-term effect

V. Government and the news

A. Prominence of the president
1. Theodore Roosevelt: systematic cultivation of the press
2. Franklin Roosevelt: press secretary a major instrument for cultivating press
3. Press secretary today: large staff, many functions
4. White House press corps is the focus of press secretary
5. Unparalleled personalization of government

B. Coverage of Congress
1. Never equal to that of president; members resentful
2. House quite restrictive
   a. No cameras on floor until 1978
   b. Sometimes refused to permit coverage of committees
   c. Gavel-to-gavel coverage of proceedings since 1979
3. Senate more open
   a. Hearings since Kefauver; TV coverage of sessions in 1986
   b. Incubator for presidential contenders through committee hearings

VI. Interpreting political news

A. Are news stories slanted?
1. Most people believe media, especially television, from which they get most news
   a. But percentage that think media biased is increasing
   b. Press itself thinks it is unbiased
2. Liberal bias of national media elite
3. Various factors influence how stories are written
   a. Deadlines
   b. Audience attraction
   c. Fairness, truth imposed by professional norms
   d. Reporters', editors' beliefs
4. Types of stories
   a. Routine stories: public events regularly covered
      (1) Reported similarly by all media; opinions of journalists have least effect
      (2) Can be misreported: Tet offensive
   b. Selected stories: public but not routinely covered
      (1) Selection involves perception of what is important
      (2) Liberal and conservative papers do different stories
      (3) Increasing in number; reflect views of press more than experts or public
   c. Insider stories: not usually made public; motive problem

5. Studies on effects of journalistic opinions
   a. Nuclear power: antinuclear slant
   b. School busing: probusing
   c. Media "spin" almost inevitable
6. Insider stories raise questions of informant's motives
   a. From official background briefings of the past . . .
   b. . . . To critical inside stories of post-Watergate era

B. Why do we have so many news leaks?
1. Constitution: separation of powers
   a. Power is decentralized
   b. Branches of government compete
   c. Not illegal to print most secrets
2. Adversarial nature of the press since Watergate
   a. Press and politicians distrust each other
   b. Media are eager to embarrass officials
   c. Competition for awards
   d. Spurred by Irangate: arms for hostages
3. Cynicism created era of attack journalism
   a. Most people do not like this kind of news
   b. Cynicism of media mirrors public's increasing cynicism of media
   c. People believe media slant coverage
4. Public confidence in big business down and now media are big business
5. Drive for market share forces media to use theme of corruption

C. Government constraints on journalists
1. Reporters must strike a balance between
   a. Expression of views
   b. Retaining sources
2. Abundance of congressional staffers makes it easier
3. Governmental tools to fight back
   a. Numerous press officers
   b. Press releases—"canned news"
   c. Leaks and background stories to favorites
   d. Bypass national press for local
   e. Presidential rewards and punishments for reporters based on their stories

C. Key Terms Match

Match the following terms and descriptions:

a. Associated Press
b. attack journalism
c. canned news
d. community needs
e. equal time rule
f. fairness doctrine
g. FCC
h. feature stories
i. Freedom of Information Act
j. insider stories
k. loaded language

1. ____ British legislation to punish officials who divulge private government business
2. ____ U.S. legislation guaranteeing citizens access to certain government documents
3. ____ An organization founded for the telegraphic dissemination of news in 1848
4. ____ Sensationalized news reporting
5. ____ Investigative reporters such as Lincoln Steffens
6. ____ Filmed stories for evening television news
7. ____ The government agency charged with regulating the electronic media
8. ____ Information from a government official who can be quoted by name

(continued)

l. market (television)
m. muckrakers
n. Official Secrets Act
o. off the record
p. on background
q. on deep background
r. on the record
s. reckless disregard
t. right-of-reply rule
u. routine stories
v. selective attention
w. sound bite
x. trial balloon
y. visuals
z. White House press corps
aa. yellow journalism

9. ____ Information from an official that cannot be printed
10. ____ Information from an official that can be printed, but not attributed to the official by name
11. ____ Information from an official that can be printed, but not attributed at all
12. ____ A court standard for finding the media guilty of libeling officials
13. ____ An official criterion for the renewal of broadcast licenses
14. ____ A principle that formerly obligated broadcasters to present both sides of an issue
15. ____ An obligation on broadcasters to give all candidates equal access to the media
16. ____ An area easily reached by one television signal
17. ____ The tendency of people to see what they like and ignore what they do not like
18. ____ Reporters regularly assigned to cover the president
19. ____ Public events regularly covered by reporters
20. ____ Public events not regularly covered by reporters
21. ____ Events that become public only if revealed to reporters
22. ____ Press releases or other news items prepared for reporters
23. ____ Journalism that seizes upon information that might question the character or qualifications of a public official
24. ____ Words that reflect a value judgment, used to persuade the listener without making an argument
25. ____ An FCC rule permitting a person the right to respond if attacked on a broadcast other than in a regular news program
26. ____ A brief statement no longer than a few seconds used on a radio or television broadcast
27. ____ Information provided to the media by an anonymous source as a way of testing reaction to a potential policy or appointment

D. Did You Think That . . . ?

Below are listed a number of misconceptions. You should be able to refute each statement in the space provided, referring to information or argumentation contained in this chapter. Sample answers appear at the end of the Handbook.

1. "Freedom of the press means that Congress cannot regulate the mass media."

_____

_____

_____

JOURNALISM 101: HUMAN NATURE

The people of the press are people, too. So where does that leave the idea of objectivity?

By ANNA QUINDLEN

A FUNNY THING HAPPENED TO ME ON THE WAY TO this column. I endorsed a presidential candidate.

For those of you who have spent months looking at the television screen over a slice of pizza and saying, "I don't care if Kevin Costner is the Reform Party candidate, I'm voting for George W.," this may not seem remarkable. But in the journalistic profession it is not at all the done thing, even among opinion columnists. Careful readers may see this as vainglorious. If a list of a dozen columnists were to be drawn up and a four-part grid laid out next to it, not unlike one of those "what do your color choices say about you?" quizzes in lifestyle magazines, many could effortlessly drop the pundit into the appropriate box: liberal, conservative, Republican, Democrat. Except for Dave Barry, who I suppose is the Jesse Ventura of columnists.

But reporters and editors and even opinion columnists are expected, according to the mostly unwritten rules, to be on the outside looking in, to reflect events without becoming part of them. This is a cornerstone of the profession, embodied by the venerable Walter Lippmann decades ago in a single word: objectivity. A lofty goal, a great notion. Yet at some level the notion is nonsense, and it has helped to poison the compact between the people and the press in present-day news reporting.

Take a report released by the Women's Leadership Fund about the press coverage of female gubernatorial candidates. It found that personal characteristics were more often reported, and stands on the issues less often reported, in stories about women running for office. The study concluded that the candidacies of women may be subtly undercut by that sort of coverage.

This is bad, and it should change. But it also reflects not simply the press but the world. After all those years of hearing "How do I look?" there are men who think the color of a woman's dress is a worthy factoid, and even some women who think so, too. The Leadership Fund's study doesn't show a conscious pattern of sexist bias on the part of a male-dominated press, although there's still some of that around. It reflects imperfect human behavior.

And that's what the people need to understand about the press: that reporters are human. The thing is, the press needs to admit it, too. The discussions of objectivity have often made news gathering sound like a cross between a standardized test and a utopian state, in which the reporter becomes a tabula rasa, reflecting truth like a mirror. This is impossible even under the best of circumstances. Reporters and editors bring to the table their backgrounds, their friendship circles, their covert prejudices. Along with deadline pressures, these things shape whom they choose to talk to, what they manage to see and how they put all this together in words a pictures. The effect is usually subtle. But the effect is always there.

Sometimes it is not subtle at all. I happened to be in our nation's capital when the story broke about the president and the then unnamed intern. Washington is a city in which reporters learn what Americans are thinking by talking to—and sometimes dating—political operatives and lobbyists; thus after three days I began repeating the prevailing opinion, that the days of the Clinton presidency were numbered. When I returned home I was deprogrammed and subsequently realized that the president was sullied but safe. Reporters, however, were in grave danger of appearing seamy and foolish.

Yet the Lewinsky debacle may have marked a turn for the better. In its wake the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press did a survey that showed, as usual, that people were disgusted with the media. But the center also did a survey that showed that journalists were more critical than ever of their own standards, and terribly concerned about the distrust of readers.

Readers are in a better position to deal with that distrust than at any moment in history. Don't trust press reporting of the debates? Watch them yourself. Believe one newspaper or news magazine is biased? Skim two, or three, or read the wire stories online. Not interested in Monica's diet or Newt's divorce? C-Span, friend, C-Span. Where once there were only three evening news programs, now there are dozens. Never before has it been possible to learn so much from so many different sources in so many different fashions.

But none of that should let reporters off the hook. The problem is that the press sometimes seems to suggest that reporting is objective science, that there is no scrim between the reader and the information. But there is always a scrim. The scrim is the reporter. And some reporters manage to shave it to a shadow, while others get in the reader's way, not usually because of overt bias but because of the limitation of their talents. We always carry with us what we've learned and those we like. But the best reporters, whether among the old guys in hats who once populated city rooms or the lacquered consonant-cracking princesses of local TV news, use that only as a starting point. Objectivity is a goal. Curiosity is the way to get there.

So what can readers conclude from the fact that six months ago, before I had returned to journalism, I gave a speech in support of Bill Bradley? Perhaps that I'll favor one man over another. Maybe just the opposite. In "Fat Man in a Middle Seat," his self-deprecating memoir of a reporter's life, Jack Germond writes of one campaign, "I wondered at times whether I was not bending over backwards to be hard on Hart only because I liked him so much. That happens sometimes with reporters." Certainly I'll feel readers looking over my shoulder whenever I write about the presidential race. But in the relationship between the people and the people the press, that's always part of the deal. Together, somehow, we make sense of the world, in a fashion that, if we are being honest, is eminently satisfactory, and yet often satisfies no one.

Summary Questions

1. Why does the author believe that "old style" political heroes are no longer possible?
2. It has been said that American voters prefer a "candidate of the people, but not like the people." What does this mean? Would Meyrowitz agree with this assertion?

8.2

The Mass Media: Free and Independent?

Michael Parenti

It is usually conceded that the mass media set the agenda for public debate, but there is a great deal of disagreement over the extent of the agenda. Are important issues left out? Are certain ideas systematically excluded from public consideration? How free are the media to act as a watchdog by addressing items that are potentially embarrassing to government and important economic interests?

Michael Parenti believes that the American media simply cannot either seriously scrutinize government and economic elites or facilitate genuinely open political debate. He sees mass communications essentially as a business, run by businesspeople for profit and increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few corporations. One result is that the media favor business and capitalism and discredit opposing views or fail to give them a fair hearing. This orientation extends to coverage of foreign affairs. In Parenti's view, government manipulation of the press is common, and government agencies have a long history of suppressing information they do not want the public to have.

For all the talk about a free press, it comes as a shock to some people to discover that the major media are an increasingly concentrated component of corporate America, being themselves giant companies or subsidiaries of conglomerates controlled by a small number of top banks and corporations, and

Michael Parenti received his Ph.D. from Yale University and has taught political science at a number of colleges and universities.

a handful of rich conservative tycoons like Rupert Murdoch and Walter Annenberg. Murdoch, for instance, owns major newspapers in England, Australia, New York, and Chicago, a European cable network, and is co-owner of 20th Century Fox and a chain of television stations in the United States. Another example: the Tribune Company owns, besides the *Chicago Tribune* and the Chicago Cubs, television stations in Los Angeles, Atlanta, New Orleans, and Denver, five radio stations, fifteen cable television systems, and the *New York Daily News*. As Charles Perlik, president of the Newspaper Guild, observed: "The news industry has always been a business, run by businessmen—and an occasional businesswoman. Today it is in danger of being run—and overrun—by financiers."[1]

Of the "independent" television stations, 80 percent are affiliates of one of the three major networks, NBC, CBS, and ABC. Except for the local news, practically all the shows they run are network programs. Most of the remaining "independents" are affiliated with NET, the "educational" network, which receives most of its money from the Ford Foundation (controlled largely by the Morgan and Rockefeller banks) and a few allied foundations. The Ford Foundation picks NET's board of directors and reserves the right to inspect every program produced with Ford money.

Newspapers show a similar pattern of ownership. Two-thirds of the 1700-odd dailies, controlling 80 percent of circulation, are owned by chains like Gannett and Knight-Ridder. The trend in ownership concentration continues unabated, as the large chains buy not only independent papers but other chains. The "free and independent American press" is largely a monopoly press. Less than 4 percent of American cities have competing newspapers under separate ownership; and in cities where there is a "choice," the newspapers offer little variety in ideological perspective and editorial policy. In general, newspapers vary mostly from moderately conservative to ultraconservative, with a smaller number that are centrist or tepidly liberal.

Most of the "independent" dailies rely on the wire services and big-circulation papers for stories, syndicated columnists, and special features. Like television stations, they are independent more in name than content. Coverage of national and local affairs is usually scant, superficial—consisting of a few brief "headline" stories and a number of conservative or simply banal commentaries and editorials.

Along with the accelerated concentration of ownership is the growing trend toward cross-media conglomerates, as corporations and banks engage in mammoth multibillion-dollar takeovers of newspapers, television and radio stations, magazines, publishing houses, and movie studios. What fuels these record-breaking mergers? As one conservative publication explains: "The profits are almost unbelievable."[2] Like other businesses, the media corporations are diversified and multinational, controlling print, broadcast, and film outlets throughout Latin America, Asia, and the Middle East—as well as in Europe and North America.

Government coercion and official censorship are not the only threats to freedom of the press. As a report by one group of scholars noted, protection

against the state is not enough: "The owners and managers of the press determine which person, which facts, which version of the facts, and which ideas shall reach the public."[3] The pro-business, conservative, and centrist biases of the mainstream media are readily evident. Given the media's pattern of ownership and dependency on big-business advertising, labor unions have few opportunities to present programs on the needs and struggles of working people. Peace activists seldom get a chance to challenge the military-industrial complex. Information favorable to existing socialist countries is systematically suppressed. . . .

Of the many interesting documentaries made by independent film producers, dealing critically with racism, women's oppression, labor oppression, corporate environmental abuse, the FBI, and U.S. imperialism in Central America and elsewhere, few if any have ever gained access to commercial movie houses or major television networks. In 1986, for instance, the documentary *Faces of War*, revealing the destructive U.S.-supported counterinsurgency waged against the people of El Salvador, was denied broadcast rights in twenty-two major television markets.

Journalists express concern about having their stories killed, about getting reassigned, passed over for promotion, and fired. *New York Times* columnist Tom Wicker testifies:

> When I was *Times* bureau chief in Washington, I was a member of the League of Gentlemen [i.e., the established elite]; otherwise I never would have been bureau chief. Time after time, good reporters . . . complained about not being able to get stories in the paper. And time after time I said to them, "You're just not going to get *that* in the *New York Times* . . . it's too reliant on your judgment rather than on official judgment, it's too complex, it contradicts the official record more flagrantly than the conventions of daily journalism allow."[4]

News reports on business rely mostly on business sources and allow little space for the views of antibusiness critics, or the communities and individuals afflicted by business. Reports about State Department or Pentagon policies rely heavily on State Department and Pentagon releases. Media coverage of the space program uncritically accepts the government's claims about the program's desirability and seldom gives exposure to the arguments made against it.

An Official Press

Far from being vigilant critics, most news organizations share the counterrevolutionary, anticommunist assumptions and vocabulary of the media magnates who own them. For years the press has supported cold-war policies, indulging in an unremitting Soviet-bashing and a hatred and fear of existing socialist societies that is so formidable in its ideological monopoly as to permeate even much of the American left. The Vietnam War was portrayed in the media as a noble but ill-conceived venture, with little attention given to the underlying

class interests and to the horrendous devastation wreaked by U.S. forces upon the Vietnamese people and their society and environment. . . .

For twenty-five years, the Shah of Iran, a friend of the U.S. oil companies and a product of the CIA, maimed and murdered tens of thousands of dissident workers, students, peasants and intellectuals. For the most part, the American press ignored these terrible happenings and portrayed Iran as a citadel of stability and the Shah as an enlightened modernizer. However, when the Polish government cracked down on the Solidarity union in Poland in December 1981, resulting in the death of several miners and the incarceration of several thousand other people, every network, newspaper, and newsmagazine gave these events top-story play for weeks on end. . . .

The business-owned media treats the atrocities of U.S.-sponsored rightist regimes with benign neglect while casting a stern, self-righteous eye on popular revolutions, as in Nicaragua. Generally the press defames leftist movements and governments and supports those right-wing pro-capitalist dictatorships that are clients of the multinational corporations.

When seven political parties participated in elections in Nicaragua in 1984, with each accorded funds and free television time by the government during a campaign judged to be fair and open by teams of observers from neutral countries, the U.S. media—following the White House line—treated the election as a rigged affair conducted under "unfair conditions." The news media never provided evidence to support that conclusion, but simply repeated the charges in successive news stories and editorials. That same year, however, the U.S.-sponsored election held in El Salvador between two right-wing candidates, under highly coercive and restricted conditions—including the lack of secret ballots—was hailed in the U.S. press as a great blossoming of democracy (in a country where most of the labor-union leadership had been assassinated along with thousands of other opponents of the regime). . . .

The workings of the capitalist political economy remain another area uncharted by the news media. The need to invest surplus capital; the tendency toward a falling rate of profit; the drive toward profit maximization; the instability, recession, inflation, and underemployment—these and other such problems are treated superficially, if at all, by newspersons and commentators who have neither the knowledge nor the permission to make critical analyses of multinational corporatism. Instead, economic adversity is ascribed to innocent and unavoidable causes, such as "hard times." One television commentator put it this way: "Inflation is the culprit and in inflation everyone is guilty." When economic news is reported, it is almost always from management's viewpoint.

Each evening the network news programs faithfully report the Dow Jones stock-exchange averages, but stories deemed important to organized labor are scarcely ever touched upon, according to a study made by union members. Reporters fail to enlist labor's views on national questions. Unions are usually noticed only when they go on strike, but the issues behind the strike, such as job security, occupational and public safety, and resistance to loss of benefits are

seldom acknowledged. The misleading impression is that labor simply turns down "good contracts" because it wants too much for itself.

There are few militantly progressive and no avowedly socialist commentators and editorialists in the mass media. Of the liberal columnists and commentators, most take care to present themselves as judiciously moderate—that is, they avoid class issues and direct confrontations with class power, knowing full well who their employers are and under what limits they are working. Some liberal commentators have been refused radio spots even on the relatively infrequent occasions they have had sponsors who would pay. When independent liberal groups manage to muster enough money to buy broadcasting time or newspaper space, they still may be denied access to the media—as has happened to those wanting to run ads against the Vietnam War, the nuclear arms buildup, and U.S. intervention in Central America.

Denied access to the major media, the political left has attempted to get its message across through little magazines and radical newspapers, publications that suffer chronic financial difficulties and sometimes harassment from police, FBI, rightist vigilantes, the IRS, and the U.S. Postal Service. Dissenters also attempt to make themselves heard by mobilizing great numbers of people in public protest. But popular demonstrations against official policies are often trivialized, undercounted, and accorded minimal coverage by the business-owned media. The September 1981 march on Washington, in which a half million working people protested Reagan's policies, was the largest ever to take place in that city. In June 1982, upwards of a million people marched in New York to protest nuclear armaments in the largest demonstration in U.S. history. However, neither historic event received direct coverage (unlike the marriage of England's Prince Charles or the funeral of Monaco's Princess Grace). The networks preferred to concentrate on sporting events on those days, giving but a few minutes of evening news to these massive expressions of popular sentiment.

This is not to say that the press is entirely immune to mass pressures. If, despite the media's misrepresentation and neglect, a well-organized and persistent public opinion builds around an issue or set of issues, the press eventually feels compelled to acknowledge its existence. If the popular opinion is strong and widespread and *if it does not attack the capitalist system as a system*, it can occasionally break through the media-controlled sound barrier, albeit with selected images. On occasion, acts of skulduggery and cover-up are committed in high places involving no class-wide interest as such but leaving prominent personages—presidential cabinet members or even the president—vulnerable before the law. When elite power is thus weakened for a time and held accountable to law in a democratic way, then it is hard to keep the press from digging into the story, especially an important one like the Watergate scandal or the Iran-contra connection. In such instances, conservatives are convinced the press is a liberal conspiracy dedicated to wrecking the system. . . .

To combat what they see as the ideological "softness" of the centrist media, hardcore ultraconservatives have launched repeated attacks on specific newspersons and have induced corporations to withdraw their advertising support from certain programs. They have organized corporate proxy fights against those news organizations deemed not sufficiently sympathetic to the right's message, and have poured millions of dollars into building new media outlets to compete with the centrist media; these include the religious right's radio network, consisting of 1,300 local stations, and two national networks, PTL and CBN; each has almost as many affiliates as ABC. Spreading the gospel is only one concern of the Christian rightists; most of the programming is economically conservative, militaristic, phobically anticommunist, antiunion, and hostile toward the needs of minorities.

It is said that a free and independent press is a necessary condition for democracy, and it is frequently assumed that the United States is endowed with such a press. While the news in "totalitarian" nations is controlled, we Americans supposedly have access to a wide range of competing sources. In reality, the controls exerted in the United States, while more subtle than in some other countries, leave us with a press that is far from "free" by any definition of the word. When it comes to getting the other side of the story, Americans are a rather deprived people. U.S. programs can be heard throughout Eastern Europe via Voice of America. American films are regularly shown in socialist countries. Twenty percent of the television shows in Poland come from the United States. American novels and other books are translated and widely read in the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries. Cubans can watch Miami television and listen to a half dozen U.S. radio stations and to Spanish-language Voice of America programs. But how many Americans are exposed to the media and literature of socialist countries? More importantly, how many Americans get information about their *own* country, from *within* their own country, that is contrary to the capitalist orthodoxy? . . .

The Politics of Entertainment

While the entertainment sector of the media, as opposed to the news sector, supposedly has nothing to do with politics, entertainment programs in fact undergo a rigorous political censorship. Shows that treat controversial, antiestablishment subjects often have trouble getting sponsors and network time. The censorship code used by Procter & Gamble, the largest television advertiser in the United States, for programs it sponsors states in part: "Members of the armed forces must not be cast as villains. If there is any attack on American custom, it must be rebutted completely on the same show."[5] Truly radical themes are eschewed by both the networks and Hollywood. On the rare occasions a leftist film is produced, such as *1900*, or *Reds*, or *Burn*, it is likely to be accorded a limited distribution.

But entertainment shows contain plenty of politics of their own. Be it adventure film, prime-time drama, or soap opera, adversities are caused by ill-willed

individuals rather than by the economic and social system in which they live, and problems are solved by individual effort within the system rather than collective effort against it. Evening soap operas like "Dallas" and "Dynasty" depict a corporate world of ruthless tycoons engaged in an amoral pursuit of wealth, power, and sex—but the audience is invited to identify with, rather than reject, it all.

Revolutionaries and foreign agents are seen as menacing our land, and the military and police as protecting it. Movies like *Rambo* glorify the killing of Communists and depict Russians as subhumans who delight in torture and atrocity. Other films like *Red Dawn* and *Invasion USA*, and television specials like ABC's "Amerika," offer fantasy depictions of the conquest of the United States by Soviet troops—assisted by Cubans and Nicaraguans. The message is clear: the Soviets are our inexorable enemy and we had better not expect to live in peace and friendship with them. . . .

In the media, women appear less often than men and primarily in subsidiary roles as housewives, secretaries, and girlfriends, who are usually incapable of initiating responsible actions of their own. In media advertisements it is even worse: women seem predominantly concerned with being cheery, mindless handmaidens who shampoo a fluffy glow into their hair, wax floors shiny bright, make yummy coffee for hubby, and get Junior's grimy clothes sparkling clean. One-fifth of all television time is taken up with commercials that often characterize people as loudmouthed imbeciles whose problems are solved when they encounter the right medication, cosmetic, or cleanser. In this way, industry confines the social imagination and cultural experience of millions, teaching people to define their needs and life-styles (and those of hubby, wifey, and baby) according to the dictates of the commodity market.

For years, characters who were Afro-American, Latino, or some other ethnic minority were given little exposure except in unflattering stereotyped roles. When minorities have made appearances in cop shows, it has been most often as crooks, pimps, informers, or persons in need of assistance from White professionals. Working people in general, be they White, Black, Latino, or whatever, have little representation in the entertainment media except as uncouth, simple persons, hoodlums, sidekicks, and other stock characters. The tribulations of working-class people in this society—their struggle to make ends meet; the specter of unemployment; the lack of decent recreational facilities; the victimization by unscrupulous landlords and realty developers; the loss of pensions and seniority; the bitter strikes and the historical and ever-present battle for unionization, better wages, and work conditions; the dirty, noisy, mindless, dangerous quality of industrial work; the lives wrecked by work-connected injury and disease—these and other realities are given little if any dramatic treatment in the business-owned media.

In recent years, however, partly in response to the public pressure of a more politically advanced audience, there have been changes for the better. Various television series like "Hill Street Blues," "St. Elsewhere," "Cagney and Lacey," "Who's the Boss," and "Hail to the Chief" have offered plots with some social content and have projected women and minorities as intelligent and capable persons, sometimes as doctors, lawyers, district attorneys, police lieutenants, or as occupying other positions of authority and empowerment. Situation comedies continue to be loaded with a contrived and frenetically aggressive or downright silly humor. But in some of the better ones, like "The Cosby Show," minorities are portrayed as intelligent, likable, and decent people. And in a few rare films, such as *Norma Rae*, the struggles of working people have been given respectful attention.

Not all air time is given to commercial gain. The Federal Communications Commission requires that broadcasters devote some time to public-service announcements. Like the free space donated by newspapers and magazines, this time is monopolized by the Advertising Council, a group composed of representatives from the networks and big business. No public-interest groups are represented. While supposedly "nonpolitical," the Council's "public service" commercials laud the blessings of free enterprise and falsely claim that business is "doing its job" in hiring veterans, minorities, and the poor. Workers are exhorted to take pride in their work and produce more for their employers—but nothing is said about employers paying more to their workers. The ads blame pollution on everyone (but not on industry) and treat littering as the major environmental problem. In general, social and political problems are reduced to individual failings or evaded altogether. Air time that could be used by conservationists and labor, consumer, and other public-interest groups has been preempted by an Advertising Council that passes off its one-sided ads as noncontroversial and nonpartisan.

Repressing the Press

On those rare occasions when the news media expose the murky side of official doings, they are likely to encounter serious discouragements from public authorities. Government officeholders treat news that places them in an unfavorable light as "slanted" and criticize reporters for not presenting the "accurate" and "objective" (that is, uncritical and supportive) viewpoint. These kinds of attacks allow the media to appear as defenders of free speech against government pressure, instead of supporters of the established order as they more commonly have been.

The federal government has used the FBI to harass and arrest newspersons who persist in writing troublesome news reports. The Justice Department won a Supreme Court decision requiring reporters to disclose their information sources to grand-jury investigators, in effect reducing the press to an investigative arm of the courts and the prosecution—the very officialdom over whom it is supposed to act as a watchdog. Dozens of reporters have since been jailed or threatened with prison terms on the basis of that decision. On repeated occasions the

government has subpoenaed documents, tapes, and other materials used by news media. Such interference imposes a "chilling effect" on the press, a propensity—already evident in news reports—to slide over the more troublesome aspects of a story and censor oneself in order to avoid censorship by those in power.

To offer one of numerous recent examples: in May 1986, William Casey, then CIA director, threatened to prosecute NBC, the *Washington Post*, and other media, for printing stories that supposedly violated "national security." One of these stories concerned an American who was charged with selling the Soviets information about how U.S. submarines were spying in Soviet harbors. But if the Soviets already knew about this, then suppressing the story would only keep it from the American people. While the U.S. government attempts to prevent unauthorized leaks to the press, it itself continually leaks information when it serves official purposes. As *New York Times* columnist James Reston noted, the administration "leaks the baloney it thinks people will swallow, and threatens to sue anybody who publishes information it wants to suppress."[6]

In 1986 the Reagan administration admitted that it had generated misinformation against Libyan leader Colonel Qaddafi as part of a campaign to overthrow him. This revelation evoked shocked comments from newspaper editors and executive producers of news shows—as if it were the first time the government had ever tried to manipulate the press. In fact, most American presidents and other top officials have attempted to manipulate the news flow. . . .

In 1983, the White House refused to let reporters cover the U.S. invasion of Grenada, thus making certain that the public would get only the official version. This was the first time in U.S. history the press had been banned from covering a war. "The exclusion of reporters during the first days of the Grenada invasion gave new meaning to the concept that no country can limit the freedom of others without also limiting it for itself."[7] While these curbs were supposed to be temporary, the government came up with a set of guidelines in October 1984 that were to be imposed on all future surprise military operations; these included limiting the number of reporters to a select pool, imposing press blackouts, and restricting coverage. . . .

Government manipulation of the press is a constant enterprise. Every day the White House, the Pentagon, and other agencies release thousands of self-serving statements and reports to the media, many of which are then uncritically transmitted to the public as information from independent news sources. White House staffers meet regularly with network bosses and publishers to discuss and complain about specific stories and reporters. They withhold information or feed misleading data to troublesome journalists. And in the 1980s the administration increased its control over what becomes news by severely reducing reporters' expectations about having full access. As the *New York Times*'s Washington editor, Bill Kovach, stated: "[The administration's] whole attitude is that government information belongs to the government." Helen Thomas of UPI, dean of the White House press corps, complained: "They [the administration] pick the story every day. They pick the one that will almost invariably wind up on the

nightly news, and that's the one they answer questions on or give access to information about. [On] a lot of events, we're absolutely blacked out, and if you don't like it, too bad. The whole attitude is: We will tell you what we think you should know."[8]

From what has been said so far it should be clear that one cannot talk about a "free press" apart from the economic and political realities that determine who owns and controls the media. As [Herbert] Schiller asks: "How may at least a part of the nation's information and cultural apparatus be rescued from near-total corporate control and made accountable and accessible to the viewing, listening and reading public?"[9]

There is no such thing as unbiased news. All reports and analyses are selective and inferential to some inescapable degree—all the more reason to provide a wider ideological spectrum of opinions and not let one bias predominate. If in fact we do consider censorship to be a loathsome danger to our freedom, then we should not overlook the fact that the media are already heavily censored by those who own and control them. The very process of selection allows the cultural and political biases and class interests of the selector to operate as a censor. Some measure of ideological heterodoxy could be achieved if public law required all newspapers and broadcasting stations to allot substantial portions of space and time to a diverse array of political opinion, including the most progressive and revolutionary. But given the interests the law serves, this is not a likely development.

An existing statute, known as the Fairness Doctrine, requires that unpaid time be given to an opposing viewpoint—only if a particular editorial opinion is voiced, which discourages some stations from engaging in discussions of political questions. The law makes no requirement as to the diversity of the opposing viewpoints, so usually the range is between two slightly different establishment stances. In the 1980s, the Reagan administration all but ceased enforcing the Fairness Doctrine, with the consequence that advocacy advertising by corporations and well-financed conservative private organizations rose dramatically.* In 1985, these interests spent an estimated $1.8 billion to communicate their views on a variety of public issues. Advocacy ads tend to be emotionally charged appeals paid by corporate sponsors who often hide behind public-service sounding names. . . .

* In 1985 the Federal Communications Commission, reflecting the Reagan administration's deregulation policy, declared that the Fairness Doctrine unduly restricted the broadcast media in comparison with the print media. The FCC further argued that the plurality of media in American society makes the Fairness Doctrine unnecessary. The doctrine was not immediately scrapped, however, because the Commission was not sure whether Congress had mandated the requirement. A 1986 federal appeals court ruled that Congress had never fully embraced the rule, and the FCC no longer applies it. Attempts within Congress to reinstate the requirements have been unsuccessful.

With few exceptions, those who own the newspapers and networks will not relinquish their hold over private investments and public information. Ordinary citizens will have no real access to the media until they come to exercise control over the material resources that could give them such access, an achievement that would take a different kind of economic and social system than the one we have. In the meantime, Americans should have no illusions about the "free press" they are said to enjoy.

Notes

1. Charles Perlik, address before the Newspaper Guild, reprinted in the *Daily World*, November 7, 1985: As of the 1980s, the majority of all American newspapers, magazines, radio and television stations, publishing houses, and movie studios were controlled by fifty giant corporations, which themselves interlocked financially with massive industries and major banks: Ben Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983).
2. *U.S. News and World Report*, May 13, 1985.
3. Report by the Commission on Freedom of the Press, quoted in Robert Cirino, *Don't Blame the People* (New York: Vintage, 1972), 47.
4. Quoted in Kevin Kelly, " 'League of Gentlemen' Rates Media," *Guardian*, February 13, 1985.
5. Eric Barnouw, *The Television Writer* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1962), 27.
6. *New York Times*, May 21, 1986.
7. Mike Zagarell, "News Reporting—the Military Vies for Command," *World Magazine*, November 1, 1984, p. 8.
8. Both Kovach and Thomas are quoted in *Washington Post*, June 10, 1985.
9. Herbert Schiller, "Beyond the Media Merge Movement," *Nation*, June 8, 1985, pp. 696–98.

Summary Questions

1. According to Parenti, what items should be on the nation's political agenda that are not? Why does he believe political dialogue through the nation's mass media is one-sided?
2. In Parenti's view, how is censorship practiced in the United States? Why is it difficult for the media to resist censorship attempts by business and government?

8.3

Is There an Anti-Republican, Anti-Conservativ Media Tilt?

Larry Sabato

Given the importance of mass communications in modern campaigns, i not surprising that charges of media bias are frequently leveled by ca dates and their supporters who feel that opponents are being aided by the cont and tone of the news. In 1992 supporters of incumbent President Geo Bush and independent candidate Ross Perot felt particularly aggrieved, believ that the national news media were wittingly hostile to their respective choi while presenting news coverage that portrayed Democrat Bill Clinton in a fav able light.

In this article, Larry Sabato surveys the empirical evidence from the press c erage in the last presidential election and finds that, on the whole, "the pr was certainly a Clinton ally in 1992." Besides a much higher proportion of negat to positive references to Bush or Perot compared to Clinton in press and netw news stories, the media tilt was enhanced by late-night comics and so prime-time entertainment shows, such as "Murphy Brown," which bashed Rep licans and promoted Democrats. Particularly costly to the Bush campaign was media's coverage of the economy: instead of focusing upon economic data t pointed to a recovery from the recession, coverage emphasized the negative especially unemployment rates.

Sabato believes that although the ideology and partisan identity of report played a role in the liberal, pro-Democrat slant of the media, in addition, Geor Bush was not well liked personally by reporters. Still another problem for Bu was the fact that "the press is traditionally tougher on an incumbent administ tion, whatever its party affiliation, especially so in hard times." Sabato conclud that the election results, however, did not hinge on media coverage since "pre tilt has a marginal-to-moderate effect, no more and no less."

A surprising number of prominent journalists and commentators, not from the conservative wing of their profession, insist that in the 19 general election the press leaned heavily in Bill Clinton's dire tion. Republicans are overwhelmingly of this opinion, having long ago consign

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LARRY SABATO

From *Feeding Frenzy*

When political scientist Larry Sabato published his 1991 book on the media's role in campaigning, he gave a term to a phenomenon others had already seen: a feeding frenzy. The press en masse attacks a wounded politician whose record—or more accurately, his or her character—has been questioned. Every network and cable station participates, often without any real evidence to back up the rumor. Sabato's list of thirty-six examples ends in 1990; knowledgeable readers will be able to update the list. Paradoxically, the spectacular success of the Washington Post's *Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein in investigating Watergate set the stage for recent feeding frenzies. Today, just the fear of being a media target may deter many qualified people from entering public service, Sabato notes.*

IT HAS BECOME a spectacle without equal in modern American politics: the news media, print and broadcast, go after a wounded politician like sharks in a feeding frenzy. The wounds may have been self-inflicted, and the politician may richly deserve his or her fate, but the journalists now take center stage in the process, creating the news as much as reporting it, changing both the shape of election-year politics and the contours of government. Having replaced the political parties as the screening committee for candidates and officeholders, the media propel some politicians toward power and unceremoniously eliminate others. Unavoidably, this enormously influential role—and the news practices employed in exercising it—has provided rich fodder for a multitude of press critics.

These critics' charges against the press cascade down with the fury of rain in a summer squall. Public officials and many other observers see journalists as rude, arrogant, and cynical, given to exaggeration, harassment, sensationalism, and gross insensitivity. . . .

Press invasion of privacy is leading to the gradual erasure of the line protecting a public person's purely private life. This makes the price of public life enormously higher, serving as an even greater deterrent for those not absolutely obsessed with holding power—the kind of people we ought least to want in office. Rather than recognizing this unfortunate consequence, many in journalism prefer to relish their newly assumed

role of "gatekeeper," which, as mentioned earlier, enables them to substitute for party leaders in deciding which characters are virtuous enough to merit consideration for high office. As ABC News correspondent Brit Hume self-critically suggests:

> We don't see ourselves institutionally, collectively anymore as a bunch of journalists out there faithfully reporting what's happening day by day. . . . We have a much grander view of ourselves: we are the Horatio at the national bridge. We are the people who want to prevent the bad characters from crossing over into public office.

Hume's veteran ABC colleague Sander Vanocur agrees, detecting "among some young reporters a quality of the avenging angel: they are going to sanitize American politics." More and more, the news media seem determined to show that would-be emperors have no clothes, and if necessary to prove the point, they personally will strip the candidates naked on the campaign trail. The sheer number of journalists participating in these public denudings guarantees riotous behavior, and the "full-court press" almost always presents itself as a snarling, unruly mob more bent on killing kings than making them. Not surprisingly potential candidates deeply fear the power of an inquisitorial press, and in deciding whether to seek office, they often consult journalists as much as party leaders, even sharing private vulnerabilities with newsmen to gauge reaction. The *Los Angeles Times's* Washington bureau chief, Jack Nelson, had such an encounter before the 1988 campaign season, when a prospective presidential candidate "literally asked me how long I thought the statute of limitations was" for marital infidelity. "I told him I didn't know, but I didn't think [the limit] had been reached in his case!" For whatever reasons, the individual chose not to run.

As the reader will see later in this volume, able members of the news corps offer impressive defenses for all the practices mentioned thus far, not the least of which is that the press has become more aggressive to combat the legions of image makers, political consultants, spin doctors, and handlers who surround modern candidates like a nearly impenetrable shield. Yet upon reflection, most news veterans recognize that press excesses are not an acceptable antidote for consultant or candidate evils. In fact, not one of the interviewed journalists even attempted to justify an increasingly frequent occurrence in news organizations: the publication of gossip and rumor *without convincing proof.* Gossip has always been the drug of choice for journalists as well as the rest of the political community, but as the threshold for publication of information about private lives has been lowered, journalists sometimes cover politics as "Entertainment Tonight" reporters cover Hollywood. A bitter Gary Hart* observed: "Rumor and gossip have become the coins of the political realm," and the *New York Times's* Michael Oreskes seemed to agree: "1988 was a pretty sorry year when the *National Enquirer* was the most important publication in American journalism." With all the stories and innuendo about personal vice, campaigns appear to be little more than a stream of talegates (or in the case of sexual misadventures, tailgates).

The sorry standard set on the campaign trail is spilling over into coverage of governmental battles. Ever since Watergate,† government scandals have paraded across the television set in a roll call so lengthy and numbing that they are inseparable in the public consciousness, all joined at the Achilles' heel. Some recent lynchings such as John Tower's failure to be confirmed as secretary of defense,‡ rival any spectacle produced by colonial Salem. At the same time more vital and revealing information is ignored or crowded off the agenda. *Real* scandals, such as the savings-and-loan heist or the influence peddling at the Department of Housing and Urban Development in the 1980s, go undetected for years. The sad conclusion is inescapable: The press has become obsessed with gossip rather than governance; it prefers to employ titillation rather than scrutiny; as a result, its political coverage produces trivialization rather than enlightenment. And the dynamic mechanism propelling and demonstrating this decline in news standards is the "feeding frenzy." . . .

The term *frenzy* suggests some kind of disorderly, compulsive, or agitated activity that is muscular and instinctive, not cerebral and thoughtful. In the animal world, no activity is more classically frenzied than the feeding of sharks, piranhas, or bluefish when they encounter a wounded prey. These attack-fish with extraordinarily acute senses first search out weak, ill, or injured targets. On locating them, each hunter moves in quickly to gain a share of the kill, feeding not just off the victim but also off its fellow hunters' agitation. The excitement and drama of the violent encounter builds to a crescendo, sometimes overwhelming the creatures' usual inhi-

*Former Senator (D-Col.) Gary Hart's 1988 presidential candidacy ended after media revelations about his extramarital relations with Donna Rice.—Eds.

†Watergate began with the 1972 break-in at the Democratic National headquarters by several men associated with President Nixon's re-election committee. Watergate ended two years later with the resignation of President Nixon. Nixon and his closest aides were implicated in the coverup of the Watergate burglary. Tapes made by President Nixon of his Oval Office conversations revealed lying and obstruction of justice at the highest levels of government.—Eds.

‡In 1989, the Senate rejected President Bush's nominee for secretary of defense, former Texas Senator John Tower. Senate hearings produced allegations that Tower was an excessive drinker and a womanizer.—Eds.

bitions. The frenzy can spread, with the delirious attackers wildly striking any object that moves in the water, even each other. Veteran reporters will recognize more press behavior in this passage than they might wish to acknowledge. This reverse anthropomorphism can be carried too far, but the similarity of piranha in the water and press on the campaign trail can be summed up in a shared goal: If it bleeds, try to kill it.

The kingdom of politics and not of nature is the subject of this volume, so for our purposes, a feeding frenzy is defined as the press coverage attending any political event or circumstance where a critical mass of journalists leap to cover the same embarrassing or scandalous subject and pursue it intensely, often excessively, and sometimes uncontrollably. No precise number of journalists can be attached to the term *critical mass*, but in the video age, we truly know it when we see it; the forest of cameras, lights, microphones, and adrenaline-choked reporters surrounding a Gary Hart, Dan Quayle, or Geraldine Ferraro is unmistakable. [The following table] contains a list of thirty-six events that surely qualify as frenzies. They are occasions of sin for the press as well as the politicians, and thus ideal research sites that will serve as case studies for this book. A majority (twenty-one) are drawn from presidential politics, while seven examples come from the state and local levels, with the remaining eight focused on government scandals or personal peccadilloes of nationally recognized political figures. . . .

Conditions are always ripe for the spawning of a frenzy in the brave new world of omnipresent journalism. Advances in media technology have revolutionized campaign coverage. Handheld miniature cameras (minicams) and satellite broadcasting have enabled television to go live anywhere, anytime with ease. Instantaneous transmission (by broadcast and fax) to all corners of the country has dramatically increased the velocity of campaign developments today, accelerating events to their conclusion at breakneck speed. Gary Hart, for example, went from front-runner to ex-candidate in less than a week in May 1987. Continuous public-affairs programming, such as C-SPAN and CNN, helps put more of a politician's utterances on the record, as Senator Joseph Biden discovered to his chagrin when C-SPAN unobtrusively taped Biden's exaggeration of his résumé at a New Hampshire kaffeeklatsch in 1987. (This became a contributing piece of the frenzy that brought Biden down.) C-SPAN, CNN, and satellite broadcasting capability also contribute to the phenomenon called "the news cycle without end," which creates a voracious news appetite demanding to be fed constantly, increasing the pressure to include marginal bits of information and gossip and producing novel if distorting "angles" on the same news to differentiate one report from an-

FEEDING FRENZIES: CASE STUDIES USED FOR THIS BOOK

From Presidential Politics	
1952	Richard Nixon's "secret fund"
1968	George Romney's "brainwashing" about Vietnam
1968	Spiro Agnew's "fat Jap" flap
1969	Ted Kennedy's Chappaquiddick
1972	Edmund Muskie's New Hampshire cry
1972	Thomas Eagleton's mental health
1976	Jimmy Carter's "lust in the heart" *Playboy* interview
1976	Gerald Ford's "free Poland" gaffe
1979	Jimmy Carter's "killer rabbit"
1980	Billygate (Billy Carter and Libya)
1983	Debategate (Reagan's use of Carter's debate briefing books)
1984	Gary Hart's age, name, and signature changes
1984	Jesse Jackson's "Hymietown" remark
1984	Geraldine Ferraro's family finances
1985/86	Jack Kemp's purported homosexuality
1987	Gary Hart and Donna Rice
1987	Joseph Biden's plagiarism and Michael Dukakis's "attack video"
1987	Pat Robertson's exaggerated résumé and shotgun marriage
1988	Dukakis's mental health
1988	Dan Quayle (National Guard service, Paula Parkinson, academic record, rumors such as plagiarism and drugs)
1988	George Bush's alleged mistress
From the State and Local Levels	
1987/88	Governor Evan Mecham on the impeachment trail (Arizona)
1987/88	Chuck Robb and the cocaine parties (Virginia)
1983/90	Mayor Marion Barry's escapades (District of Columbia)
1987	Governor Dick Celeste's womanizing (Ohio)
1988	Mayor Henry Cisneros's extramarital affair (San Antonio, Texas)
1989/90	Governor Gaston Caperton's "soap opera" divorce (West Virginia)
1990	Texas governor's election: drugs, rape, and "honey hunts"
Noncampaign Examples	
1973/74	The Watergate scandals
1974	Congressman Wilbur Mills and stripper Fanne Foxe
1986/87	The Iran-Contra affair
1987	Supreme Court nominee Douglas Ginsburg's marijuana use (and campaign repercussions)
1989	John Tower's losing fight to become secretary of defense
1989	Speaker Jim Wright's fall from power
1989	Tom Foley's rocky rise to the Speakership
1989/90	Barney Frank and the male prostitute

other. The extraordinary number of local stations covering national politics today—up to several hundred at major political events—creates an echo chamber producing seemingly endless repetitions of essentially the same news stories. This local contingent also swells the corps traveling the campaign trail. In 1988 an estimated two thousand journalists of all stripes flooded the Iowa caucuses, for instance. Reporters not infrequently outnumber participants at meetings and whistlestops. . . .

Whether on the rise or not, the unfortunate effects of pack journalism are apparent to both news reporters and news consumers: conformity, homogeneity, and formulaic reporting. Innovation is discouraged, and the checks and balances supposedly provided by competition evaporate. Press energies are devoted to finding mere variations on a theme (new angles and wiggle disclosures), while a mob psychology catches hold that allows little mercy for the frenzy victim. CNN's Frank Sesno captures the pack mood perfectly:

> I've been in that group psychology; I know what it's like. You think you're on to something, you've got somebody on the run. How dare they not come clean? How dare they not tell the full story? What are they trying to hide? Why are they hiding it? And you become a crusader for the truth. Goddammit, you're going to get the truth! . . .

Sesno's crusader spirit can be traced directly to the lingering effects of the Watergate scandal, which had the most profound impact of any modern event on the manner and substance of the press's conduct. In many respects Watergate began the press's open season on politicians in a chain reaction that today allows for scrutiny of even the most private sanctums of public officials' lives. Moreover, coupled with Vietnam and the civil rights movement, Watergate shifted the orientation of journalism away from mere description—providing an accurate account of happenings—and toward prescription—helping to set the campaign's (and society's) agendas by focusing attention on the candidates' shortcomings as well as certain social problems.

A new breed and a new generation of reporters were attracted to journalism, and particularly its investigative arm. As a group they were idealistic, though aggressively mistrustful of all authority, and they shared a contempt for "politics as usual." Critics called them do-gooders and purists who wanted the world to stand at moral attention for them. Twenty years later the Vietnam and Watergate generation dominates journalism: They and their younger cohorts hold sway over most newsrooms, with two-thirds of all reporters now under the age of thirty-six and an ever-increasing share of editors and executives drawn from the Watergate-era

class. Of course, many of those who found journalism newly attractive in the wake of Watergate were not completely altruistic. The ambitious saw the happy fate of the *Washington Post's* young Watergate sleuths Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, who gained fame and fortune, not to mention big-screen portrayals by Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman in the movie *All the President's Men*. As *U.S. News & World Report's* Steven Roberts sees it:

> A lot of reporters run around this town dreaming of the day that Dustin Hoffman and Robert Redford are going to play them in the movies. That movie had more effect on the self-image of young journalists than anything else. Christ! Robert Redford playing a journalist? It lends an air of glamour and excitement that acts as a magnet drawing young reporters to investigative reporting.

The young were attracted not just to journalism but to a particular *kind* of journalism. The role models were not respected, established reporters but two unknowns who refused to play by the rules their seniors had accepted. "Youngsters learned that deductive techniques, all guesswork, and lots of unattributed information [were] the royal road to fame, even if it wasn't being terribly responsible," says Robert Novak. After all, adds columnist Mark Shields, "Robert Redford didn't play Walter Lippmann and Dustin Hoffman didn't play Joseph Kraft." (Kraft, like Lippmann, had a long and distinguished career in journalism.) . . .

A clear consequence of Watergate and other recent historical events was the increasing emphasis placed by the press on the character of candidates. As journalists reviewed the three tragic but exceptionally capable figures who had held the presidency since 1960, they saw that the failures of Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon were not those of intellect but of ethos. Chappaquiddick, Spiro Agnew, and the Eagleton affair reinforced that view. The party affiliations and ideology of these disappointing leaders varied, but in common they possessed defects of personality, constitution, and disposition. In the world of journalism (or academe), as few as two data points can constitute a trend; these six together constituted an irrefutable mother lode of proof. "We in the press learned from experience that character flaws could have very large costs," says David Broder, "and we couldn't afford to ignore them if we were going to meet our responsibility." . . .

[A] troubling consequence of modern media coverage for the political system has to do with the recruitment of candidates and public servants. Simply put, the price of power has been raised dramatically, far too high for many outstanding potential officeholders. An individual contemplating a run for office must now accept the possibility of almost unlim-

ited intrusion into his or her financial and personal life. Every investment made, every affair conducted, every private sin committed from college years to the present may one day wind up in a headline or on television. For a reasonably sane and moderately sensitive person, this is a daunting realization, with potentially hurtful results not just for the candidate but for his or her immediate family and friends. To have achieved a nongovernmental position of respect and honor in one's community is a source of pride and security, and the risk that it could all be destroyed by an unremitting and distorted assault on one's faults and foibles cannot be taken lightly. American society today is losing the services of many exceptionally talented individuals who could make outstanding contributions to the commonweal, but who understandably will not subject themselves and their loved ones to abusive, intrusive press coverage. Of course, this problem stems as much from the attitudes of the public as from those of the press; the strain of moral absolutism in portions of the American people merely finds expression in the relentless press frenzies and ethicsgate hunts. . . . *New York Times* columnist Anthony Lewis is surely correct when he suggests, "If we tell people there's to be absolutely nothing private left to them, then we will tend to attract to public office only those most brazen, least sensitive personalities. Is that what we want to do?"

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MORLEY WINOGRAD
MICHAEL HAIS

From *Millennial Makeover*

Former Governor Howard Dean's 2004 presidential bid did not succeed in vaulting the doctor into the White House, but it did break new ground in campaign tactics. Morley Winograd and Michael Hais trace the rise of the "Netroots" political activists, citizens who meet and participate in campaigns using Internet sites. The authors tell the story of two young Millennials who ran for the state legislature in New Hampshire using some then-obscure social networking strategies. The campaign became an "event," with the outcome successful for both. Winograd and Hais detail how the Internet has expanded the potential for candidates to reach voters—primarily young voters but older voters too—particularly through the use of YouTube. As those of you who followed the 2008 presidential election recall, YouTube campaign ads caused many flurries of excitement, with the most controversial commercials often reserved for the Net rather than for broadcast or cable TV. It is the sharing of online messages that make them so influential, Winograd and Hais remind us. They predict that "the resulting cataclysm will wash away the current politics of polarization and ideological deadlock, putting in place a new landscape of collective purpose and national consensus that involves individuals and communities in solving the nation's problems."

POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS ARE THE EQUALS of any media company when it comes to wanting to run things from the top and control every aspect of the product they are selling. As Joe Trippi, Howard Dean's campaign manager in 2004, wrote, "Most campaigns do everything in their power to control every element of the candidate's image and message, from the clothes he wears to each word out of his mouth." As a consultant to Silicon Valley start-ups, Trippi could see that the notion of running a campaign from the bottom up would require an "open source" approach, with control located, if at all, in the swarm of contributors to the campaign's efforts rather than at its headquarters. But, as he pointed out to Dean, attempting such a feat would be like "jumping from a fifteen-story building" and trusting the front line troops would be there to catch you. In a DeanNation blog posted in May 2003, Trippi wrote, "Every political

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DIANA MUTZ

How the Mass Media Divide Us

How the mass media divide us is by entertaining us with TV shows that are built on bitter debate, sharp disagreement, and angry confrontation. This makes for exciting shows but has negative consequences for American politics. When people watch these uncivil exchanges, Professor Diana Mutz believes, they become more extreme in their political views. Mutz, an expert in communications and political psychology, has conducted some interesting studies to substantiate her thesis. Perhaps you don't remember when former Senator Zell Miller told commentator Chris Matthews that he'd like to meet him in a duel: Hardball *was definitely memorable that night! Perhaps C-SPAN's talking heads, who discuss issues calmly and drone on too long, are not very entertaining, but they would be more beneficial to political dialogue. There are many factors behind the polarization that has characterized American politics in the past decades, and Mutz has identified an important one.*

"SHOUT-SHOW" TELEVISION has been the target of a tremendous amount of criticism from many quarters, academic and otherwise. The world of political disagreement as witnessed through the lens of political talk shows is quite polarized. Increased competition for audiences has led many programs on political topics to liven themselves up in order to increase audience size. Thus, political talk shows such as *The McLaughlin Group, The O'Reilly Factor, Meet the Press, Capital Gang, Hardball,* and many others tend to involve particularly intense and heated exchanges.

The issue of contentiousness and incivility in political discourse was brought to a head in October 2004, when *Daily Show* host Jon Stewart appeared on *Crossfire* and openly criticized this program (and others like it) for its "partisan hackery," which Stewart said was "hurting America." Is there any truth to Stewart's claim? Aside from the obvious distastefulness some find in watching politicians scream, yell, and interrupt one another for thirty minutes or more, how is this kind of in-your-face politics implicated as a potential cause of mass polarization?

The tendency on television is to highlight more emotionally extreme and less polite expressions of opinion, and research suggests that these expressions of incivility may have important consequences for attitudes

toward the opposition. These consequences flow from the fact that politeness and civility are more than mere social norms; they are means of demonstrating mutual respect. In other words, uncivil discourse increases polarization by helping partisans think even less of their opponents than they already did.

And yet market forces seem to favor the kind of television that encourages polarization. Polarized political discourse and an angry opposition makes for compelling television. Viewers may claim that they find it disgusting, but they cannot help watching—just as passing motorists cannot help "rubbernecking" when there is an accident alongside the highway. It is not that people actually *enjoy* what they are seeing, but there is something about information of this kind—information about life and death, about conflict and warring tribes in a dispute—that makes it difficult to ignore. Evolutionary psychologists have pointed to the adaptive advantage of having brains that automatically pay attention to conflict as a means of staying alive in an earlier era. At a cognitive level, of course, no one really expects to be caught in the "crossfire" of a televised partisan shout-fest. But even when it is "only television," and thus poses no real threat of bodily harm, people cannot help but watch and react to incivility.

My own research suggests that psychologists are correct about the demands of incivility on human attentional processes. To examine the difference that incivility makes independent of political content, I produced a mock political talk show—on a professional television set using professional actors as congressional candidates. The candidates espoused the same issue positions and made exactly the same arguments for and against various issue positions in two different versions of the program. In one discussion, however, they raised their voices, rolled their eyes, and engaged in an impolite, uncivil exchange. In the civil version of the program, they spoke calmly, refrained from interrupting one another, and showed mutual respect simply by obeying the social norms for polite discourse.

The differences in viewer reactions to the two programs were startling. The group randomly assigned to the uncivil version of the political discussion came away with roughly the same feelings toward their preferred candidate as those in the civil group. But attitudes toward the "other side" became much more intensely negative when the two exchanged views in an uncivil manner. The more dramatic, uncivil exchanges encouraged a more black-and-white view of the world: their candidate was not just the best; the alternative was downright evil.

This effect was evident for partisans on both sides of the political spectrum and regardless of which candidate they liked best. Interestingly,

watching the uncivil version led to greater polarization in perceptions of "us" versus "them," relative to a control group, but watching the civil version of the exchange led to *decreased* levels of polarization. This pattern of findings suggests that political television has the potential to *improve* as well as to exacerbate the divide among partisans of opposing views; it simply depends upon how those differences of opinion are aired. When differences of opinion are conveyed in a manner that suggests mutual respect, viewers are able to understand and process the rationales on the other side and are less likely to see the opposition in starkly negative terms. Differences of opinion are perceived as having some legitimate and reasonable basis. But when those same views and rationales are expressed in an uncivil manner, people respond with an emotional, gut-level reaction, rejecting the opposition as unfairly and viciously attacking one's cherished views.

Using indicators of physiological response, my studies also demonstrate that televised incivility causes viewers' levels of emotional arousal to increase, just as they do when people encounter face-to-face incivility. In the face of real-world conflict, this reaction supposedly serves a functional purpose—participants are given the rush of adrenaline they may need to flee the situation. But with televised incivility, this kind of reaction serves no purpose; it is simply a remnant of brains that have not adapted to twentieth-century representational technology.

Even though viewers are just third-party observers of other people's conflicts on television, they show heightened levels of emotional arousal, just as people do when encountering face-to-face disagreement. This is not so surprising if one considers how it feels to be a third-party observer of a couple's argument at a dinner party. The same discomfort, awkwardness, and tension exist, even for those not directly involved in the conflict. Likewise, when political commentator Robert Novak stormed off the set of a live broadcast of CNN's *Inside Politics* in August 2004, viewers were uncomfortable—and they paid attention. The tension was palpable to viewers, even though few may be able to remember what the substance of the conflict was.

The heightened arousal produced by incivility can make it difficult to process the substance of the exchange. Some arousal helps to call attention to what otherwise might be considered bland and uninteresting. But at extremely high levels of arousal, people will remember only the emotional content of the program (who screamed at whom, who stomped off in a pique) and recall little of the substance of the disagreement. As anyone who has ever had an argument knows, there is a point at which the emotional content of the exchange overwhelms any potential for rational

discourse. As a result, viewers gain little understanding of the other side. They perceive their own side of the debate as unfairly attacked, and thus the incivility their own candidate displays is simply an appropriate level of righteous indignation in reaction to an unprovoked attack. The incivility demonstrated by the opponent demonstrates that he is a raving lunatic, wholly unfit for office.

In addition to this disdain for the opposing side, incivility produces a second important reaction—heightened attention. As Bill O'Reilly, host of *The O'Reilly Factor*, suggests, "If a radio producer can find someone who eggs on conservative listeners to spout off and prods liberals into shouting back, he's got a hit show. The best host is the guy or gal who can get the most listeners extremely annoyed—over and over and over again." Evidently, these sorts of shows have hooked Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.), who indicated that she and her husband Bill now have TiVo, a technology that allows a viewer to record and replay television programs. And for what purpose do the senator and the former president use TiVo? According to Senator Clinton, they use it to record the most outrageous statements made by their political opponents so they can play them over and over and yell back at the television. An optimist might regard this vignette as an example of how viewers are *not* necessarily selectively exposing themselves to politically compatible media. But the pessimist would undoubtedly point out that yet another media mechanism of polarization has kicked in to take its place. Uncivil political discourse that produces such strong emotional reactions is unlikely to further the cause of political moderation.

Controlled laboratory studies suggest, for better or worse, that O'Reilly is correct: incivility is extremely entertaining and people like to watch it, even if it is just to scream back. Despite the fact that many viewers claim to be repulsed by it, the respondents who viewed the identical but uncivil version of the same program always rated it as more entertaining, found it more exciting to watch, and indicated a greater desire to see the uncivil program again than the civil version. Polite conversation is boring, and the deliberative ideal for political discourse makes for dull television. "I acknowledge there are some good points on my opponent's side" will probably never make good television, whereas "These evil people must be stopped!" always will.

With these findings in mind, it is important to consider the extent to which the rise of televised political incivility can help explain mass polarization. Is political discourse truly any more uncivil now than in the past? Some have suggested that the United States is in the midst of a "civility crisis" in its public life. As then University of Pennsylvania president Ju-

dith Rodin argued in 1996, "Across America and increasingly around the world, from campuses to the halls of Congress, to talk radio and network TV, social and political life seem dominated today by incivility. . . . No one seems to question the premise that political debate has become too extreme, too confrontational, too coarse." Similar calls for greater civility in political discourse have come from a wide array of scholars, as well as from philanthropic organizations. . . .

Clearly, there is a widespread perception that political discourse is much more uncivil now than in the past, but there is little historical evidence to confirm such a trend. As then senator Zell Miller (D-Ga.) implied when he wistfully said he would like to challenge *Hardball* host Chris Matthews to a duel, violence among political opponents was once far more common than it is now. Senator Miller's statement was made during an uncivil exchange between himself and a journalist during the 2004 Republican National Convention. It made headlines, precisely because the idea of using weapons to resolve political differences seemed absurd. We have not had a duel to the death among politicians for many years, and thus one could easily characterize today's political talk shows as mild by comparison.

So is it fair to say that incivility is on the rise in political discourse? There is no definitive answer to this question, but the increased *visibility* of uncivil conflicts on television seems indisputable. Although politicians of past eras may frequently have exchanged harsh words, without television cameras there to record these events and to replay them for a mass audience their impact on public perceptions was probably substantially lower. The dominance of television as a source of exposure to politics suggests that public exposure to uncivil political discourse has increased. Moreover, it is one thing to read about political pundits' or candidates' contrary views in the press, and quite another to witness them directly engaged in vituperative argument. The sensory realism of television conveys a sense of intimacy with political actors that people were unlikely to encounter in the past, even among the few lucky enough to have face-to-face meetings.

Television provides a uniquely intimate perspective on conflict. In the literature on human proxemics, the distance deemed appropriate for face-to-face interactions with public figures in American culture is more than twelve feet. Yet exposure to politicians on television gives the appearance of being much closer. When people are arguing, the tendency is to back off and put greater space between those who disagree. Instead, when political conflicts flare up on television, cameras tend to go in for tighter and tighter close-ups. This creates an intense experience for the viewers, one

in which they view conflict from an unusually intimate perspective. Political scientist Jane J. Mansbridge has noted that when open political conflict occurs in real life, bringing people together in one another's presence can intensify their anger and aggression. To the extent that a television presence has similar effects, incivility is likely to encourage polarization. . . .

The underlying question that still needs to be confronted—by scholars as well as those in the media business—is how to make a topic that is not inherently interesting to many Americans nonetheless exciting to watch. And if the answer is not behind-the-scenes coverage of election strategy, or mudslinging on political talk shows, or partisan extremists rallying the troops, then what will keep those politically marginal citizens from watching movies on cable instead?