CHAPTER 20

The Media

Topics 5.12–5.13

Topic 5.12 The Media

PRD-3.A: Explain the media's role as a linkage institution.

Topic 5.13 Changing Media

PRD-3.B: Explain how increasingly diverse choices of media and communication outlets influence political institutions and behavior.

Source: Wikimedia Commons

President Trump, Dr. Deborah Birx, and other members of the Coronavirus Task Force address the media in the Rose Garden of the White House in March 2020. At these daily briefings, President Trump used the media to share information with the public on the government's response to the pandemic.

5.12

The Media

"Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter."

—Thomas Jefferson, letter to a friend, 1787

Essential Question: How does the media function as a linkage institution?

Soon after Johannes Gutenberg created the printing press, reporting and commenting on government became commonplace. In late colonial America, pamphleteers and newspaper editors printed ideas that helped bring about the American Revolution. The media have since evolved from those hard-copy publications intended for elite audiences to instant reporting and citizen interaction via the Internet. Governments have a love-hate relationship with the press, because journalists and commentators can affect public opinion, government operation, and policy. In fact, the media wield power that rivals that of the three branches of government. For that reason, the media are often referred to as the "Fourth Estate" of government. They have the power to influence society and politics almost as effectively as government itself.

Media as a Linkage Institution

In 1734, New York writer and publisher John Peter Zenger faced an American colonial court on a charge of seditious libel. Zenger had criticized the royal governor in his weekly *New York Journal*, an illegal action at the time. Zenger's attorney argued that the truth, which was not a legitimate defense under the English law, should be an absolute defense. The jury agreed and found Zenger not guilty. This radical verdict marked the beginning of an American **free press**—an uninhibited institution that places an additional check on government to maintain honesty, ethics, and transparency—later enshrined in the First Amendment.

No matter what form it takes, the free press serves to link citizens to their government. Newspapers and television report on citizens' concerns and what their government does. Web-based news organizations provide constant updates as news develops. Social media has become a chief way for citizens and government to exchange information. All media ultimately help shape how people engage with government, including voting, and government actions.

The Traditional Press

Colonial newspapers served a major function during the American Revolution. Later, they fostered a spirit of unity for the new nation's course. However, only large cities could maintain a regular newspaper and most were only four pages and printed weekly. The first daily paper did not appear until 1784.

President Washington and Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton created *Gazette of the United States*, a newspaper to convey Federalist ideas. Thomas Jefferson's followers responded by publishing the *National Gazette*. The warring political factions debated and sometimes attacked each other through these publications. These publications strengthened the relationship between the party in power and the leaders of the press.

The partisan press ceased to dominate national media as newspapers expanded their circulation and national news organizations came into being. The 1860 opening of the Government Printing Office (GPO)—a permanent federal agency to print government publications—broke the patronage relationship between government and publishers. The GPO prints only government documents, not news stories or editorials.

In 1833, the *New York Sun* became the first successful and affordable daily newspaper. The paper cost one penny per copy and was sold at outdoor city markets. It consisted primarily of human-interest stories and recipes, which were what the average reader desired. Government activity no longer dominated the front pages. Additional similar papers began to thrive as America's readership grew and newspaper owners sought a mass audience.

The telegraph altered communication even further. In 1841, Congress funded inventor Samuel Morse's telegraph line from Washington to Baltimore. In 1848, New York's leading editors gathered to finalize plans for a formal news organization, the Associated Press (AP). By pooling resources, the editors could gather, share, and sell the news beyond their respective cities. Using the expanding telegraph lines, reporters could send information quickly from anywhere in the world to AP headquarters in New York where editors shaped the story and send it out across the nation.

During its first year, the AP covered a presidential campaign, a women's rights convention, and other national stories. It established **news bureaus**, or offices beyond a newspaper's headquarters, in Albany, New York, and Washington, DC. Because it wrote for a national audience in so many different newspapers, the AP standardized unbiased reporting in order to appeal to a range of customers. Today, other wire services such as United Press International and Reuters compete with the AP, but they all follow the same standards of reporting.

Investigative Reporting

In the early 20th century, Washington became a common dateline—the locale listed atop an article in a newspaper. Dispatches from the capital described such major news stories as the progress of the pure food and drug legislation, government efforts at trustbusting, and the controversy over railroad rates.

Progressive Era journalism fostered integrity in reporting and a publication's ability to create real change. **Investigative reporting** became a new genre, as reporters dug deep into stories to expose corruption in government and other institutions. Reporter Ida Tarbell wrote a damaging exposé of John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil monopoly. Writer Lincoln Steffens and photographer Jacob Riis revealed the tragic conditions in cities. These journalists changed the national mindset to bring about reforms. For example, breaking up monopolies became easier once the public was aware of the harsh and sometimes illegal business practices some industries used. Newspapers served as a link between citizens and their government by reporting situations that called for new legislation.

President Theodore Roosevelt shared the progressive spirit of these investigative journalists, though he did not always appreciate how they threatened his image or that of the United States. He dubbed the journalists muckrakers, a pejorative term that compared them to "the man with the muck rake" in the novel *Pilgrim's Progress*. They were too busy looking down and stirring up filth to gaze upon the stars. Lincoln Steffens proudly reflected on the label years later, "The makers of muck . . . bade me to report them."

National Political News

New media have emerged recently, profoundly influencing how citizens receive news. Yet, national newspapers such as the *Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, New York Times,* and *USA Today* remain influential, even if they have had to adapt to new modes of delivery. These newspapers continue to set the tone for national reporting.

For decades, magazines such as *Time, Newsweek,* and *U.S. News and World Report* dominated in-depth news coverage with middle-of-the-road perspectives. Other magazines cover national and international politics with a particular editorial slant. Some of the more liberal publications—*The New Republic, The Nation,* and *The Progressive*—have been around since the Progressive Era. Others, like *National Review* and *The Washington Times,* attract a conservative readership.

LEADING IDEOLOGICAL POLITICAL MAGAZINES	
Liberal	**Conservative**
The Nation	*National Review*
The New Republic	*Human Events*
The Progressive	*The Washington Times*
Mother Jones	*American Spectator*

New Communication Technologies

In the 20th century, radio and television both emerged as powerful new communication technologies. Citizens became fascinated with headlines and brief reports coming to them through the air. Broadcast stations developed

news departments to shape an industry that competed with—and later surpassed—print media in terms of news consumers.

Radio Radio first appeared shortly after World War I. The concept of a **broadcast network**—broadcasting from one central location to several smaller stations called **affiliates**—was in full force by the 1930s. Early newscasts included readings from *Time* magazine and news dramatizations featuring narrators and voice-over artists playing the parts of world leaders.

Radio journalism transitioned into more fact-based reporting as journalists moved from print to broadcast media. Edward R. Murrow was a key pioneer of this style. In 1940, Murrow broadcast from a rooftop in London in the midst of the Second World War, reporting on Germany's massive bombing efforts. Film of the war appeared in movie theaters at the time, but, as Murrow biographer Bob Edwards put it, "Newsreel footage of the Blitz is in black and white; Ed's radio reports were in color." By the end of World War II, Murrow's voice was the most familiar in radio.

Television In the postwar period, broadcast companies shifted efforts toward television. By 1951, six years after the end of the Second World War, 10 million American homes had a television. Networks worked to develop news departments, and they covered the 1948 Democratic and Republican conventions. Presidential contenders highlighted their credentials in front of the television cameras. Citizens were introduced to candidates for a live look at the individuals vying for each party's nomination. How a politician looked on television suddenly mattered.

Over the next few years, the **Big Three networks** of ABC, CBS, and NBC set the tone for television journalism that is still largely followed today. These networks began to create in-depth programming that examined national affairs, international relations, and the lives of celebrities.

Edward R. Murrow moved from radio to television in 1951 to host *See It Now*, a precursor to the weekly CBS news show *60 Minutes*. Murrow exposed Senator Joseph McCarthy by presenting examples of McCarthy's abusive tactics toward alleged American communists, which ultimately helped bring about McCarthy's downfall. Citizens trusted the voice—and now the image—of a reliable reporter over an aggressive and corrupt politician. Television journalism had asserted itself as a watchdog, which made it an even more influential medium and strengthened its linkage function.

In 1960, Senator John F. Kennedy became one of the first politicians to use the power of television to his advantage. The televised presidential debates between Kennedy and his opponent, Vice President Richard Nixon, began a new era of campaigning. More of those who viewed the debates on television felt Kennedy won, while a majority of those who listened to the debates on the radio saw Nixon as the winner. Once elected president, Kennedy proved a master of the medium, working with reporters and holding the first televised live press conferences.

In 1980, Atlanta TV station owner Ted Turner created the **Cable News Network (CNN)**. Americans suddenly had access to national news 24 hours

a day. Cable companies added MSNBC and the Fox News Channel in the mid-1990s. These three cable news networks changed television news from a daily cycle with an evening peak to a fluid cycle with updates and analysis on the hour. This "narrowcasting" appeals to a specific audience, while the more common broadcasting is intended for the mass public.

This change explains why President Bill Clinton's White House affair with Monica Lewinsky was so widely reported and why previous presidential affairs were not. Veteran White House reporter Helen Thomas noted how news reporting changed in the wake of the Lewinsky scandal: "Although gossip was also rampant about previous presidents, it remained just that—gossip—and reporters did not attempt to verify it."

Today, Fox, MSNBC, and CNN lead in viewership of cable TV news channels, though others like Bloomberg and BBC America also compete. Viewership of the top three cable channels peaked in 2008 at 4.3 million viewers per evening and has declined somewhat as more channels are offered and as people turn to the Internet for news and entertainment. The Pew Research Center reported in 2016 that about 3.1 million combined viewers tune into those channels nightly. Though viewership has dropped, ad revenues for these channels have steadily increased.

The original Big Three's (CBS, NBC, and ABC) 30-minute evening news broadcasts still lead as America's key venue for political news consumption, hovering between 23 to 25 million combined viewers each night. Though local TV news has lost some of its audience over the past decade, it still has more viewers than the chief national networks or cable TV channels. More Americans turn on the local news for traffic and weather than the national news for politics.

The Internet

The U.S. military created the Internet as a tool to connect its vast network of computers. The technology became generally available to the public in the early 1990s. It is now an ever-present source of news, information, and entertainment.

In the early days of the Internet, journalists and news-savvy citizens scoffed at news traveling across the web. But major news magazines, dailies, and other traditional media outlets have now followed their audience to the Internet. While some people still receive a daily subscription of their favorite printed newspaper, the newsprint rolling off the presses for home delivery has decreased drastically. Today, nearly all Americans (93 percent) rely on the Internet somewhat to get their news. People under 30 have made the web their preferred news source. Pew reports about 38 percent of people primarily get their news from a digital platform, versus about 20 percent from print.

Internet news sources can be divided into those outlets that were "born on the web," and "legacy" news sources. In the first category, websites such as *Huffington Post* and *Politico* are setting the standards for online political reporting. These and other digital media organizations, such as Yahoo News and BuzzFeed, have spent millions to bring well-known print and TV journalists into their ranks.

Meanwhile, traditional news outlets like the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, the legacy sources, have developed strong and popular Internet platforms for reporting. These organizations have turned to digital platforms to compete and remain afloat financially. Promoting digital versions of their newspapers has helped ease the transition from print to digital somewhat, though the number of full-time journalists has dropped from almost 55,000 in 2007 to just under 24,000 in 2015.

The shift from print to electronic journalism and the intense competition to "scoop" competitors in a fast-paced news environment has sped up publishing, shortened stories, enabled sloppy reporting, and caused journalists to seek out anything unique on an almost hourly basis to grab attention. This shift has not only encouraged sensationalism, but it also has increased the number of errors and after-story corrections.

Social Media Advances

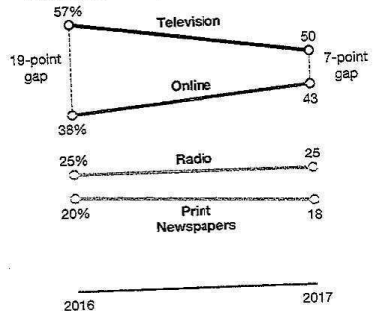
In 2004, Harvard student Mark Zuckerberg launched Facebook, originally a campus social networking site that has since grown into a multibillion-dollar corporation that engages as many as 400 million users daily worldwide. Competitors and other social media sites soon followed until social media became a primary vehicle for a vast number of Americans to consume their news. In 2018, about 86 percent of 18-to 29-year-olds used social media, and about 34 percent of senior citizens did. .

This social media interaction between consumers and news outlets has encouraged the outlets to use social media to their advantage. Even the Big Three networks now have a strong social media presence. News outlets engage readers online, allowing direct conversations between journalists and consumers. Consumers also use social media to help organize newsworthy events, such as the nationwide Women's March in January 2017 and the student-organized March for Our Lives in March 2018. Social media therefore plays an increasingly large role in shaping news presentation and consumption.

By the Numbers

Television and Online News Consumption, 2016–2017

% of U.S. adults who often get news on each platform



Source: Pew Research Center

What do the numbers show? From what media platform do Americans often obtain news the most? What portion of citizens often obtain news via the Internet? What percentage often read a printed newspaper?

Roles and Influence

The Fourth Estate has established itself as an institution in the United States, protected by the First Amendment and intertwined with government and politics. The media partially sets the agenda, grades candidates in campaign season and government performance year-round, and shines light on problems they believe government should address.

Keeping Score

Before an election, reporters update readers and viewers nonstop on the ups and downs of competing candidates. This **horse-race journalism** leads reporters to overly discuss who is leading and who is falling behind in the campaign. As a result, this **scorekeeper** role causes the media to over-emphasize public opinion polls, mainly because these numbers tend to change day to day, while it tends to ignore or under-report candidates' complex proposals or the examining of intricacies of pending legislation. Candidates' ideas, policies, or biographies remain static, so once those are reported, they are no longer newsworthy. And, poll results are simple measures that viewers can understand in short news segments.

As scorekeeper, reporters track other political successes and failures beyond election season. The scorekeeping continues after an election by examining an elected official's approval rating or by crediting or blaming the successes and failures of government proposals and programs. This constant—often circular—style of reporting also causes media outlets to turn political events into popularity contests, rather than contests in which voters make decisions based on candidate qualifications and platforms.

Gatekeeper

Much more is happening in the world than can fit into a 30-minute broadcast or in the front section of a newspaper. The news media therefore act as a **gatekeeper** by setting their own news agenda by determining what is newsworthy and therefore deciding what information the public will receive. What the media decide to publish directly influences the issues people regard as important. What the public learns through the media will encourage citizens to contact their member of Congress, write letters to the editor, and assemble in support of a cause.

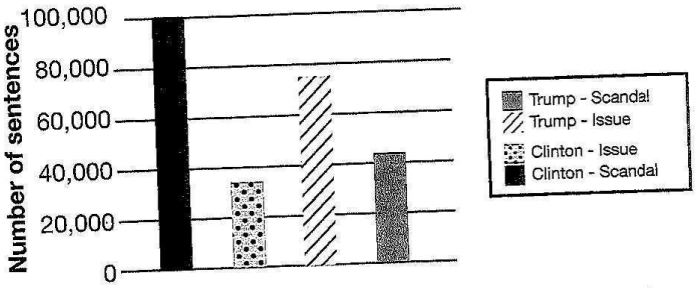
For example, a 2017 news story that implicated powerful filmmaker Harvey Weinstein as a sexual assault offender sparked a movement for women to speak out against sexual aggression and assault. Before, such accusations may have resulted in powerful people in the film industry scoffing at them or ending the accuser's movie career. As the media accurately portrayed these women as victims, the news spread quickly and encouraged additional victims (recent and old) to make similar accusations. With what became the #MeToo Movement, the press had directly or indirectly facilitated an organized effort to stop sexual aggression in the workplace.

THINK AS A POLITICAL SCIENTIST: *USE REFUTATION, CONCESSION, OR REBUTTAL IN RESPONDING TO OPPOSING OR ALTERNATE PERSPECTIVES*

In political or other arguments, opposing or alternate perspectives need to be addressed to show why the supported view, despite opposition, is still the stronger one. Argument provides several ways to address opposing or alternate perspectives: refutation, concession, and rebuttal. Refutation is proving a statement or point to be wrong through reasoning. Concession is admitting a statement or position is correct in some ways. Rebuttal is to contradict a statement or a point with facts and evidence.

Practice: Study the graphic below. Then provide a refutation, concession, or rebuttal to the claim stated below the graphic.

2016 Election Coverage, by Number of Sentences



Claim: The media coverage of negative topics leading up to the 2016 presidential election provided an unfair advantage to the eventual winner, Donald Trump.

Digging for the Truth

Keeping an eye on government or industry is part of the press's function as a **watchdog**. Investigative reporters look for corruption, scandal, or inefficiency. In fact, Congress may not even decide to address an issue until after the press has brought it to the public's attention.

Recently, the Pulitzer Prize for Investigative Journalism, the industry's top honor, was awarded to journalists who investigated the flood of opioids into West Virginia counties with the highest overdose rates in the nation, causing a series of state laws to be passed in October 2018 to address the drug problem. Also, the media has drawn the attention of the public to the responsibility of the state of Florida for violence and neglect toward mental patients in state hospitals, and a rigged system orchestrated by doctors and the denial of benefits to coal miners with black lung disease.

The media's watchdog approach was strengthened during and after the Vietnam War. Unlike the patriotic press corps during prior wars, journalists stationed in Vietnam began to question information the United States military

and diplomats presented. Television images brought the war into citizens' living rooms, and journalists did not hold back on showing the tough realities of the war. Roughly 10 American journalists were assigned to Vietnam in 1960. By 1968, about 500 full-time correspondents representing print, television, and radio were in South Vietnam. NBC Vietnam Bureau Chief Ron Steinman said "We listened, hoping to discover a kernel of truth in a fog of lies." The reporting from Vietnam helped inspire the mass protests against the war that eventually led to U.S. withdrawal. In early 1968, after a trip to Vietnam, CBS anchor Walter Cronkite—known as the "most trusted man in America"—closed the evening news with an opinionated report that had big consequences. "We have been too often disappointed by the optimism of American leaders, both in Vietnam and Washington, to have faith any longer in the silver linings they find in the darkest clouds." President Lyndon Johnson, commander in chief at the time, reportedly remarked that if he had lost Cronkite, he had also lost America.

As the conflict in Vietnam waned, President Nixon sought reelection. *Washington Post* reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein served as watchdogs by uncovering the Watergate burglary scandal. In 1972, while reporting on a burglary of the Democratic National Committee office in the Watergate Hotel, Woodward and Bernstein eventually discovered that the burglars stole information in order to help Nixon's reelection campaign. These investigative reporters kept the story alive throughout a congressional investigation and the eventual resignation of the president.

The media skepticism that grew out of these events solidified what has become an **adversarial press** in the U.S.—where reporters continually question government officials, their motives, and their effectiveness.

REFLECT ON THE ESSENTIAL QUESTION

Essential Question: *How does the media function as a linkage institution? On separate paper, complete the chart below.*

Changes in Media Coverage of Politics	Impact of Media on Elections

KEY TERMS AND NAMES

adversarial press
affiliates
Big Three networks
broadcast networks
Cable News Network (CNN)
gatekeeper
horse-race journalism
investigative reporting
news bureaus
scorekeeper
watchdog

5.13

Changing Media

"The new tools of social media have reinvented social activism . . . making it easier for the powerless to collaborate, coordinate, and give voice to their concerns."

—Malcom Gladwell, *The New Yorker*, 2010

Essential Question: How do increasingly diverse choices of media and communication outlets influence political institutions and behavior?

Media have continued to advance in the new millennium. The press covers and interacts with all three branches of government, providing political reporting to citizens. The media provide a great diversity of choices to reach citizens from different walks of life and with different depths of concern. The reporting and commentary that comes out of various outlets also shape citizens' views of politics, government, and policy. Increased media options, ideologically oriented programming, and consumer-driven media decisions have shaped the media landscape. Information coming and going at such a fast pace and through so many platforms has called into question how much the media can be trusted. The fact-checking industry has emerged from the lack of credibility in some news outlets.

Media and the Three Branches

Various types of media coverage—objective reports on the three branches, breaking news, election coverage, and commentary—influence political participation and policy as they inform the public to make educated decisions and sometimes sway parts of the public to their way of thinking.

Political Reporting

Government and its leaders have always been topics of interest to the press and the public. Much coverage takes the form of objective **political reporting**, standard "just-the-facts" types of stories. This reporting began in the age of growing newspapers and national news services trying to reach broad audiences. An honest, unbiased approach separated the trusted reporter from one with an ideological agenda. It still does today. Front-page stories and investigative pieces usually follow this model, yet some political reporting can include other genres, such as profiles, op-eds, and critical "hit pieces." The

public sometimes finds it hard to distinguish between objective reporting and biased commentary.

Using media is an efficient and free way for government officials to make announcements, test the popularity of ideas (sometimes called "trial balloons"), or assist in operating the government. Politicians try to interact with the press in a way that paints themselves and the government institutions they run in a positive light. The press's ability to influence public opinion has always kept government officials on their toes, and the sometimes adversarial relationship between journalists and government officials creates a rift between the two. Though candidates and officeholders cannot do without the press, an unfavorable headline can sometimes make or break an official's reputation. Today, an unfortunate snapshot or video clip suddenly available on YouTube can ruin a politician's career.

This dynamic has created a love-hate relationship between the government and the press. Candidates and officeholders will frequently contact reporters to offer up a news story about themselves, their platforms, or their new programs. In reality, such efforts by politicians may be nothing more than public relations campaigns. Depending on the day's events and how much news is happening, a reporter may be grateful for the easy story that will result in a "puff piece" highlighting the positive side of a politician on the front page.

Reporters sometimes have their own agenda or bias, and how they present information in **sound bites**—short excerpts edited from a longer remark that are especially vivid in presenting an issue—can have drastically different effects on the public depending on how they are worded, so politicians take great care in providing the press with the typically eight-second sound bite they want to carry their message. President Trump declared the investigation into his campaign's ties to Russia as the "greatest political hoax in American history." Bernie Sanders encapsulated his main message into the phrase "The top 1/10 of 1 percent now owns almost as much wealth as the bottom 90 percent." Jeffery Scheuer, New York University professor and author, writes, "The sound bite culture . . . is a society that thrives on simplicity and disdains complexity."

A politician or his communications chief may deem a reporter as hostile and not return calls if the reporter seems to be painting the politician in a bad light. This tenuous and sometimes confusing relationship between government and media influences how the Fourth Estate covers the three branches of government.

Congress and Press Coverage

The House of Representatives voted during the first Congress to open its doors to the public and the press. In the late 1800s, many reporters preferred to cover Congress instead of the White House. In the 1950s, Americans became familiar with Congress during Senator McCarthy's televised committee hearings and in the 1970s during the Watergate hearings.

Congressional stories include members' roles on committees and in the legislative process—these are typically technical story lines, not easily conveyed

in short headlines or brief TV news segments. Two traditional print outlets that cover Congress, *Roll Call* and *The Hill*, have gained national popularity with their websites. Large newspapers and most TV news services have at least one Capitol Hill correspondent.

In the late 1970s, the cable industry created **C-SPAN**—the Cable Satellite Public Affairs Network—a privately funded, nonprofit public service. Cable and satellite affiliates pay fees that in turn fund the network. C-SPAN began covering the House in 1979. The Senate decided to allow cameras into its chamber in 1986, which gave rise to C-SPAN 2. Congress owns and controls the cameras in the two chambers, but C-SPAN receives the feed and can broadcast House and Senate floor debates. When Congress is not holding debate in its respective chambers, the network covers committee hearings, seminars at university campuses and think tanks, public meetings, and political rallies.

Presidents and Press Coverage

News organizations provide significant media resources to cover the president. The press delves into the president's domestic policy, relations with fellow policymakers, the first family, and interactions with other world leaders. Beyond the regular 100 or so top reporters who might cover the president daily, in person, another 2,000 have White House press credentials. Some travel on *Air Force One* (the president's plane) or on the chartered press plane that follows it.

John F. Kennedy did the first live televised press conferences in the early 1960s and developed a positive relationship between the chief executive and the media. By the end of President Richard Nixon's term in 1974, the dynamic between president and press had changed drastically. Nixon's paranoia, complicated by the release of the Pentagon Papers and the Watergate scandal (see Topic 2.4), pitted him directly against the press. He had offending reporters' phones tapped, his vice president spoke publicly about "disloyal" reporters, his Department of Justice tried to subpoena reporters' notes, and a White House aide threatened antitrust lawsuits against TV networks if they did not let more conservatives on the air. Like President Donald Trump, who tweeted that the press is the "enemy of the people" in 2019, Nixon was quoted as saying "The press is the enemy" repeatedly to Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.

In recent times, a full-time White House press secretary has served the president. The press secretary holds regular press conferences. The White House controls these media events. TV networks and wire services get preferential seating, as do the other major news outlets, such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. The more senior reporters are called on first, and the press secretary typically signals the close of the session by calling on the senior wire service reporter.

A press conference, at which presidents appear at a podium to field questions, occur less frequently than press briefings, usually only a few times each year. In their first year, Presidents George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump held 19, 27, and 21 overall press conferences, respectively.

Donald Trump's candidacy and his first year in office led to tense relationships with the press. While on the campaign trail, Trump encouraged crowds at his rallies to rough up reporters. From his inauguration onward he and his team have misled and battled with the press.

Media coverage of President Trump's initial year reflected some of the adversarial relationships between the president and the press by tending to include more stories on personality, character, and leadership than on policy. The Pew Research Center found that two-thirds of the coverage during his first year concentrated on the president's political skills, immigration policies, appointees, U.S.-Russia relations, and health care. President Trump at first held a few briefings and discontinued this custom entirely on March 11, 2019. After the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus, President Trump appeared at regular press conferences and resumed press briefings.

Courts and Press Coverage

The press covers crime, lawsuits, courtroom activity, and appeals court decisions. The Sixth Amendment requires that trials be public and thus makes regular press coverage possible. At the national level, major newspapers and television news typically assign a legal affairs correspondent to cover the Supreme Court and high-profile trials throughout the country. Viewers often see footage of a trial from the state level, especially one involving celebrities or a horrific crime. In the federal courts, however, cameras are generally not allowed. Instead, pastel drawings depicting courtroom people and events usually appear on screen during TV news coverage or on a website.

Attempts to bring cameras into the Supreme Court for increased understanding and transparency will likely fail. For every person who sees court coverage on C-SPAN gavel-to-gavel, the late Justice Antonin Scalia once warned, "10,000 will see 15-second take outs on the network news, which, I guarantee you, will be uncharacteristic of what the court does."

Political Analysis

A form of journalistic expression that explores and provides opinions on a topic in depth is called **political analysis**. This form offers explanations on topics, usually by experts, which help readers understand complex subjects. Political analysis is valuable as a way to educate news consumers on likely causes, effects, and implications of proposed legislation, court rulings, or budget proposals. Experts examine the topic from a variety of angles but do not include their own opinions on the subject.

For example, in 2014, there was discussion in the Senate about a constitutional amendment to limit campaign contributions that would have undone both *Citizens United v. FEC* and *Buckley v. Valeo*. (See Topic 5.11.) No one expected the amendment to come into being, but it provided an opportunity to reexamine the extremely complex issues intertwined in those cases. Mark Schmitt, New America's Director of Political Reform, wrote an analysis in the *Washington Post* of the amendment's likely effects. Pieces such

as these provide important information and explanations for engaged citizens who want to take seriously the consequences of government actions.

New America is a think tank that "does not engage in research or educational activities directed or influenced in any way by financial supporters," according to its website, so its political analysis is likely objective. Other think tanks, however, have strong ideological bases, such as the liberal Center for American Progress and conservative Heritage Foundation. Analysis from such think tanks would likely have a biased perspective.

Political Commentary

As journalism developed in the 20th century, it made distinctions between fact and opinion. In print newspapers, the front pages offered more of an Edward R. Murrow-style of objectivity. **Editorials**—those opinionated articles that reveal the publication's view—soon appeared on a distinct editorial page or section of the newspaper. These still appear in printed publications and online today. Editorials have no by-line or author listed, as a team of editors often draft these articles which represent the official position of the newspaper. Additionally, similar opinionated articles with an author listed appear on the opposing page to allow other opinions. These **op-eds** also appear online written by professional journalists and citizens as guest columns. On these pages a reader will find endorsements of political candidates in campaign season and praise and criticism of government officials.

On television news broadcasts, similar customs developed. Though the vast majority of minutes are devoted to straight news, newscasters and newsroom editors occasionally go on the air and read their written **commentary** as the word "Commentary" appears on the screen, meaning opinion and interpretation rather than "just-the-facts" reporting.

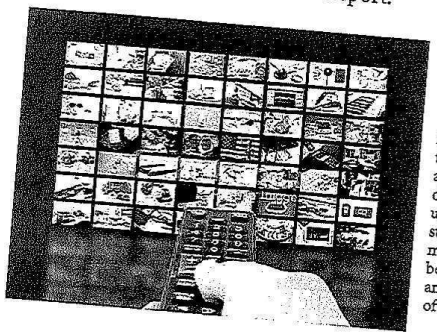
As more media outlets have appeared on cable TV and online, these distinct lines dividing news and commentary have blurred. Though the solid wall between newsrooms and editorial departments remains in the offices at some news outlets, in other places the wall between what is fact and what is opinion is not as strong or obvious. A 2018 Pew study found that the public has difficulty distinguishing between news statements of fact from those of opinion. People who considered themselves more digitally savvy could more easily discern fact and opinion than those who considered themselves politically aware.

Ideologically slanted websites and TV channels compete with and are often as powerful and present as those following traditional standards of journalism. Born-on-the-web ideological outlets and cable TV networks hire partisans, political strategists, and former Congress members and give them prominence on their web pages and in their studios. Many columns and blogs are not clearly labeled as "opinion," and thus the non-discerning reader may not immediately realize the voice of an ideological extremist and may accept those views as if they were coming from the old-guard reporter dedicated to objectivity. CNN's *Anderson Cooper 360,* for example, often showcases commentators on each

side of the political spectrum, competing not only to express their political goals but perhaps also for a more-permanent position with the network or a higher-paying offer from another channel. In other words, their statements are unlikely to be purely objective.

Cable networks have employed more and more commentators, in part because of so many expanded outlets, but mainly to draw particular audiences. The basic news can be presented in only so many ways, but commentators often have their own colorful personalities or backgrounds that serve to draw viewers looking for something different.

"Make politics boring again," says Noah Rothman in the conservative *Commentary* magazine. His bland solution might help Americans have a realistic understanding of governmental functions and would allow the press to neutralize politicians who incite controversies that exacerbate tensions. He admits, however, that his approach "would murder a lucrative industry that has turned societal divisiveness into a sport."



Media consumers have more choices than ever before as a result of producers appealing to niche markets. These often one-sided media outlets have also popped up in new media through podcasts, streaming content on YouTube, and social media outlets such as Twitter. The line between traditional journalistic content and uninformed citizen editorialization is often blurred.

Media Ownership and Bias

The increasingly diverse options presented by so many media outlets have altered how citizens rely on the media. The around-the-clock demand for information has created a fast-paced, competitive market of outlets. They constantly vie for readers, viewers, and consumers, becoming increasingly partisan in their efforts to do so. As a result, demand for more media content also encourages the growth of media outlets with a specific political agenda and a targeted audience—a concept known as **narrowcasting.**

The rapid surge of new media outlets has therefore altered the political landscape. The 1987 lifting of the **Fairness Doctrine**—a former federal policy that required radio and television broadcasters to present alternative viewpoints—has allowed media outlets more leeway and freedom in what they air. For many years, the news media had the reputation of liberal bias; however, in the last two decades conservative alternatives have increased in popularity. For example, Sinclair Broadcast Group, reaching 40 percent of American households, is known for its conservative slant. Cable television has

given birth to a variety of outlets that have altered news delivery to specialized audiences. The Internet has also created seemingly endless choices. All of these changes have redefined the roles and relationships between media and citizens.

For example, conservative radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh emerged as a national conservative voice and gained a strong following in the early 1990s. One reason he succeeded was because he created a sense of community among people already inclined to agree with one another. By 2008, this pioneer of the new medium had as many as 20 million listeners. Over the same period, **talk radio**—those syndicated political shows that air at stations coast-to-coast—grew apace and became a common way for Republicans to get political news. Without the Fairness Doctrine, there was no need to provide other viewpoints to challenge the community's beliefs, which became self-reinforcing on both the right and left. Left unchecked, both ideologies have experienced an increase in the extreme views expressed by some members of the media.

Media Ownership

In 1934, Congress passed the Federal Communications Act, which created the **Federal Communications Commission (FCC)**. The FCC regulates electronic media, and it has authority over the content of radio, television, wire, and satellite broadcasts. It also regulates ownership by attempting to prevent monopolies. In 1941, for example, the FCC forbade NBC from operating two networks. NBC sold one of its two networks, which led to the establishment of ABC. In the last years of the 20th century, the popularity of cable news exploded, the Internet became a viable news source, and the entire landscape of media ownership changed.

Though Ted Turner and CNN invented cable news in general, the **Fox News Channel (FNC)**, under the media empire of Rupert Murdoch, drastically altered it when it started in 1996. As media critic David Folkenflick claims in his book *Murdoch's World*, "No other news organization has done more in recent years to reshape that terrain than Fox." The time was ripe for an alternative news channel. The Republicans had gained control of Congress. A longstanding conservative disdain for the media had reached a new zenith.

Folkenflick shows that the news at Fox is presented in ways "that reflect and further stoke a sense of grievance among cultural conservatives against coastal elites." Since its early days, the motto "Fair and Balanced" has suggested that the other networks are not and Fox is here to correct that. Another catchphrase, "We Report, You Decide," suggested that the others—the liberal media elite—are indoctrinating viewers.

The risk paid off. After September 11 and the initial years of the George W. Bush presidency, Fox took the number one slot as the most watched cable TV news channel and it has never lost it.

A 2014 study showed that Fox had edged out the Big Three networks as the "most trusted" news overall, though not likely due to Fox's journalistic standards. Right-leaning citizens from that sample consistently backed

Fox News, while moderates and liberals chose from a variety of other not-conservative networks as the most trustworthy. Self-described conservatives trusted Fox by 48 percent. Among self-described liberals, the Big Three led as most trusted, with CNN and PBS essentially tied for second.

Impact of Ownership This market fragmentation has only encouraged network owners to find more potential viewers to turn to their channel. For those presenting political news while in search of profits—competing for viewers in order to attract advertisers—Fox, CNN, and MSNBC have each gone further away from objectivity and have revealed their bias. Studies show that 24-hour news channels actually show little substantive news, repeat sensational stories throughout the day, and have reporters talk about their story as much as traditionally reporting on it. The journalistic drive to answer the hard questions is spotty. The regular newscasters and anchors tend to ignite tempers, employ sarcasm, stoke fear, and conduct their presentations with a sense of moral righteousness. Sometimes their partisan guests deliver ad hominem attacks.

Politically savvy citizens in search of more than what the main networks offer turn to their choice of cable media, especially during election season. Most Americans still watch the evening Big Three, but during campaign season, many Americans say they turn to one or more cable channels for election coverage. In 2016, all news channels advanced in the ratings. Fox led all basic cable networks with an average of 2.5 million viewers during its prime-time lineup, up 36 percent from the previous year. CNN went up 77 percent to 1.3 million viewers and MSNBC increased at the same rate to 1.1 million.

As Pew Research Center confirms, "Those on the right and left have significantly different media diets." In a study done in late 2016, Pew found about 40 percent of Trump voters relied on Fox News as their "main source" for news. Clinton voters, on the other hand, listed CNN as their main source, but only 18 percent did so. MSNBC was second, and Fox didn't make it into the top ten for Clinton voters.

Fox viewers include a high number of self-described conservatives, 60 percent. Meanwhile both CNN and MSNBC viewers claimed to be split with roughly one-third conservative, liberal, and moderate.

Media Bias

With the explosion of niche cable networks and online news sources, there is no longer any doubt as to whether bias in the media exists. Now, it is merely a question of where it is and which way it leans. In fact, bias has become essential to the business model of several news outlets. Meanwhile, the **mainstream media**, or the collection of traditional news organizations, still operates an objective news model. Conservative critics have called the media liberal for nearly two generations, and researchers have found liberal tendencies in the media both in its membership and in its delivery. But to understand bias in the media, one has to ask, "Which media are you talking about?"

Traditional Bias Label The media have been accused of a liberal bias since the early 1970s, when the press hounded President Nixon. But that is a simplistic characterization that circumvents the real challenges of measuring bias. Today, with thousands of national reporters for every entity from Fox News to the *Huffington Post*, a sound method to determine the question of bias is challenging. One measurement is to examine the professionals who report the news. Overwhelmingly, national reporters who shape political coverage vote with the Democratic Party, and they have for some time. A 1972 poll showed that 70 percent of reporters voted for Democrat George McGovern in the presidential election. A 1992 election study discovered that 89 percent of reporters voted for Democrat Bill Clinton, who received only 43 percent of the popular vote.

Studies that examine ideological slants also find that leading news outlets describe Republican and Democratic officials differently. David Brady and Jonathan Ma found that the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* tend to treat liberal senators as cooperative bipartisans and to malign conservative senators. Their study saw a distinct difference in favorable or unfavorable adjectives that preceded "liberal" or "conservative" in their reporting. These outlets too often painted liberal senators as bipartisan lawmakers and iconic leaders of a noble cause but portrayed conservatives as hostile, combative, and out of the mainstream.

In a different study of 20 major print and TV news outlets, researchers found that only two leaned conservative, Fox News and *The Washington Times*, but the other 18 ranged from slightly to substantially left of center.

Contemporary Bias While professional journalists may still strive for objectivity, the increasing choices of media driven by writers and broadcasters of different ideological persuasions have, in some cases, made objectivity a minor concern at best. Slanted media predated the Internet, but now legacy outlets—*The New Republic*, *Slate*, and *Salon* on the left; *National Review* and *The Washington Examiner* on the right—mesh with other news sites, and readers may or may not discern source bias as they read their stories. Newer, born-on-the-web outlets, such as *Red State* or *Huffington Post*, are noticeably ideological. They and the nightly cable broadcasts provide diametrically opposite presentations and narratives of the same basic stories.

One Pew study at the end of the 2012 presidential election found President Obama received far more negative than positive coverage on Fox. About 46 percent of Fox stories on Obama were negative, while only 6 percent were positive (the remainder being neutral). The same study found MSNBC was harsher on Republican nominee Mitt Romney, with 71 percent of election stories negative and only 3 percent positive. Another study found that 90 percent of the evaluative statements made about President Trump on the ABC, CBS, and NBC nightly news from September 1 to November 30, 2017, were negative. Based on the viewership differences and where citizens are going to get their information online, people on the left and right have distinctly different information streams from those of people with mixed political beliefs.

Meanwhile, as "news sources" are playing fast and loose with journalistic norms, citizens are communicating more frequently via the Internet, and people are choosing more selectively what they read. People of like mind are supplying one another with a tailored diet of news and commentary that only confirms what they already believe. While the exercise of First Amendment rights allows people to read or not read what they want, the self-reinforcing and isolated loop of "news" is not helpful in developing consensus policy or in finding the best solutions for America's problems, nor is it helpful in understanding the alternative viewpoints.

THINK AS A POLITICAL SCIENTIST: *EXPLAIN HOW REQUIRED SUPREME COURT CASES APPLY TO SCENARIOS IN CONTEXT*

Nearly all of the cases that make it to the Supreme Court have far-reaching effects on the country, which can make their rulings very divisive. Certain cases highlight the nation's ideological divide. That divide can be fueled by the media's sometimes biased presentation of the cases and other related issues. How would today's media and its often slanted coverage present some of the required Supreme Court cases that you have studied if they were ruled and reported on today?

Practice: Review the cases listed below. If that case was ruled on by the Supreme Court today, explain how a conservative-leaning media outlet and a liberal-leaning outlet would differ in their description of the Court's decision.

United States v. Lopez (1995). See Topic 1.8.

Engel v. Vitale (1962). See Topic 3.2.

Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District (1969). See Topic 3.3.

Gideon v. Wainwright (1963) See Topic 3.8.

Roe v. Wade (1973). See Topic 3.9.

Media and Democratic Debate

Scholar and political expert Cass Sunstein calls the phenomenon of people remaining in echo chambers of their own creation "cyberpolarization." He believes public life would be better served if people relied on what he calls "the general interest intermediary," streams of information from those traditional, objective outlets. Without these, the level of political knowledge of citizens is reduced, and the result is a decline in the quality of public debate. At least four factors affect the quality of public debate and level of political knowledge: increased media choices, ideologically oriented programming, consumer-driven media and technology, and the credibility of news sources.

Increased Media Choices

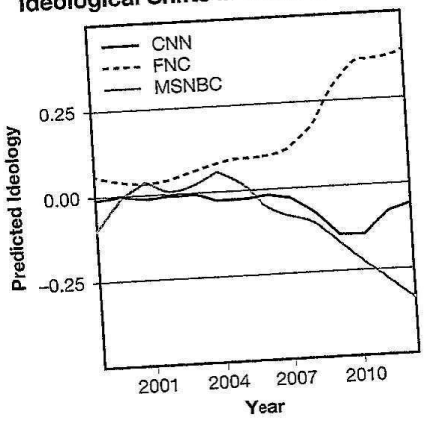
In 1960, the average American home received three television stations. By 2014, Nielsen Research estimated that the average had risen to nearly 200. Evening news telecasts on the Big Three networks changed very little from Presidents Kennedy to Clinton. Viewers could expect the time slots around the dinner hour and before bedtime to be reserved for news broadcasts. But the explosion of cable news channels and their wide variety of programming have given consumers many more choices for their time in front of the TV.

While at one time viewers were regularly exposed to the news no matter what channel they tuned to, now they can choose to watch entertainment of a seemingly endless variety instead. Studies have shown that while some people use the increased amount of news broadcasting to try to deepen their understanding of politics, others simply tune out news and politics by choosing to watch entertainment. This situation creates a gap not only in political knowledge but also in political participation because people with greater political knowledge turn out to vote more than people with less political knowledge. Public debate is diminished by the uneven distribution of political knowledge.

Ideologically Oriented Programming

Fox News is by far the most-watched cable news channel, outpacing its liberal competitors CNN and MSNBC by a significant margin. The ideologically oriented programming on cable news channels has made the outlets a subject of great interest to political scientists, who ask a number of questions about their influence on voters and public debate. How much influence do the ideologically oriented news programs actually have on viewers, especially if viewers are attracted to a channel because they already share that channel's ideology?

Ideological Shifts in Cable News



Source: Adapted from Martin and Yurukoglu 2017

Researchers Martin and Yurukoglu studied evolving liberal or conservative slants of CNN, FNC, and MSNBC based on broadcast transcripts and word connotations. The higher the score, the more conservative the slant.

A 2017 study by Emory University political scientist Gregory Martin and Stanford economist Ali Yurukoglu found that Fox News has a sizable influence on viewers' political attitudes, which in turn influence how they vote. They estimate that if Fox News hadn't been on the scene, John Kerry would likely have won the 2004 presidential election instead of George W. Bush.

They also found that CNN tried to develop its political ideology to match it to the maximum number of viewers it could attract, while Fox took a different approach. The political views of Fox are more conservative than those of their viewers, but Fox has had the effect of shifting their viewers' attitudes to the right. Fox is more successful at persuasion than the other cable news outlets and in this way is a major political agent.

As people are drawn to ideologically oriented programming, they demonstrate **confirmation bias,** the tendency to seek out and interpret information in a way that confirms what they already believe. They have no incentive, then, to consider opposing views, and yet the clash of ideas is vital for democratic debate and the democratic process. Scholar and political expert Cass Sunstein writes, "Unplanned, unanticipated encounters [of ideas] are central to democracy itself. Such encounters often involve topics and points of view that people have not sought out and perhaps find quite irritating—but that might nevertheless change their lives in fundamental ways."

Consumer-Driven Media and Technology

Confirmation bias is evident on social media as well, where more than 60 percent of Americans get news. On Facebook, for example, people exchange political links and memes in a circle of like-minded friends, in the process reinforcing their own and other group members' beliefs and even accepting as true statements that have been proven false as long as they fit in with their beliefs.

While people are creating their own "bubbles" for information sharing, usually without critical evaluation, professionally trained journalists are being laid off and printing presses are shutting down. Reliable, ethical news outlets are disappearing. Cities that once had multiple newspapers that kept one another in check as they competed to provide the best news possible may typically now have only one newspaper.

Information outlets—newspapers, television stations, and radio stations—have always had to make decisions about what issues to cover, exercising their gatekeeper function. They considered what issues they believed would be most important to their consumers and assigned their resources to cover those issues accordingly. They always had to attract readers or go out of business. In today's highly competitive media environment, however, consumer-driven media has entered a new dimension. **Consumer-driven media** are those media whose content is influenced by the actions and needs of consumers. Ultimately, these media outlets are businesses, and profit drives their actions. The desire to attract the most consumers and, in turn, make the most profits influences the way media present issues or events.

Now news companies and tech companies figure out what the average consumer will click on and generate stories from there. In other words, the role of gatekeeper has been passed on from experienced journalists to average web surfers. Responsible news outlets still try to balance the forces of genuine newsworthiness and popular interests. But in the competitive media world, too often the citizen-gatekeepers, perhaps more interested in the Kardashians than foreign policy, have become the gatekeepers. When more trivial topics are covered at the expense of serious issues, the level of political knowledge and public debate declines.

Continuously monitored ratings provide similar data for television news stations, which now have to compete with not only other news stations but also a wide array of other programming—including on-demand services such as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video. Some analysts believe the hunger for ratings contributed to Donald Trump's rise to the Republican presidential nomination among a field of experienced politicians. As journalist and Fox contributor Michael Goodwin explains, at first the media treated Donald Trump's candidacy as a publicity stunt, until "television executives quickly made a surprising discovery; the more they put Trump on the air, the higher their ratings climbed." Cable news shows started devoting hours to simply pointing the cameras at Trump as he gave off-the-cuff speeches at his rallies. By one estimate, Goodwin notes, Trump received so much free airtime that if it had been purchased, it would have cost $2 billion.

Managers of legacy news organizations are changing their business model and operating differently to survive. "Dependence generates desperation," laments Franklin Foer, former editor at the New Republic. "A mad, shameless chase to gain clicks through Facebook, a relentless effort to game Google's algorithms," has altered the role of one of progressive journalism's century-old magazines. When Google changes an algorithm—such as the rules by which autocomplete fills in possibilities after a user enters a few words to start, or the rules determining the order in which search results appear—web traffic can change significantly, benefiting some media companies and hurting others. In this way, tech companies can influence the ethics and ethos of an entire profession.

Credibility of News Sources

While Americans have more media choices and more control over what information to seek, consumers are simultaneously sent information from people with an agenda: friends and family who are of like mind, media sources with the goal of gaining more clicks, political groups trying to impact public opinion, or foreign adversaries trying to stoke the flames of discord or to influence an election. The result is an era of dubious credibility and impulsive clicks.

Pew discovered that when citizens access political news digitally, they go to a news organization's website 46 percent of the time. Social media is the second most frequently used source, 31 percent of the time; 20 percent go through a

search engine such as Google; and 24 percent seek out news links after receiving email alerts from a news organization or friend. Those who independently go to a reliable news organization are more likely to get credible information.

Consumers are not always as responsible in their consumption of news as an informed and engaged citizenry would require. For example, this same Pew study found that citizens who received an article via social media could recall and name the original news outlet only 56 percent of the time. Another finding was that fully 10 percent cited "Facebook" as the news outlet, when of course Facebook is not a news outlet at all.

If indeed this is an era of consumer-driven media, then consumers demanding credibility and objectivity would have influence in the content news outlets provide. Author Clay Johnson in *The Information Diet* compares consumers' intake of news to their consumption of food and argues that the problem is not that people consume too much information but rather that they take in too much "junk" information. Just as people have to consciously make choices about healthy eating, they need to make responsible choices about news consumption. He advocates for education in media literacy so people can develop the critical evaluation skills needed to make informed choices about information.

REFLECT ON THE ESSENTIAL QUESTION

Essential Question: *How do increasingly diverse choices of media and communication outlets influence political institutions and behavior? On separate paper, complete the chart below.*

Media that Influences Political Participation	Influence of Media

KEY TERMS AND NAMES

commentary
confirmation bias
consumer driven media
C-SPAN
editorials
Federal Communications Commission (FCC)
Fox News Channel (FNC)
Fairness Doctrine
mainstream media
narrowcasting
op-ed
political analysis
political reporting
sound bites
talk radio

CHAPTER 20 Review:
Learning Objectives and Key Terms

TOPIC 5.12: Explain the media's role as a linkage institution. (PRD-3.A)

Media's Role in Connecting People to Government (PRD-3.A.1)

- affiliates
- Big Three networks
- broadcast networks
- Cable News Network (CNN)
- free press
- investigative reporting
- news bureaus

Media's Influence in Elections (PRD-3.A.2)

- adversarial press
- horse-race journalism
- gatekeeper
- scorekeeper
- watchdog

TOPIC 5.13: Explain how increasingly diverse choices of media and communication outlets influence political institutions and behavior. (PRD-3.B)

Media's Influence on Politics (PRD-3.B.1)

- commentary
- C-SPAN
- editorials
- op-eds
- political analysis
- political reporting
- sound bites

Media Bias (PRD-3.B.2)

- Fairness Doctrine
- Federal Communications Commission (FCC)
- Fox News Channel (FNC)
- mainstream media
- narrowcasting

Media and Democratic Debate (PRD-3.B.2)

- confirmation bias
- consumer-driven media
- talk radio