

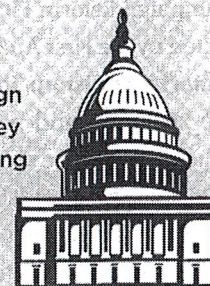
KEY CONCEPT 5.D: THE MEDIA AS LINKAGE

The media as a linkage institution provides opportunities for citizens to participate in the political process based on the information they receive.

The **Big Idea, Civic Participation in a Representative Democracy**, is reflected by this concept.

CONTEMPORARY CONNECTION

The term “fake news” was coined by President Trump in his campaign speeches and repeated often after he fired FBI director James Comey in 2017 and a special prosecutor was appointed. Much of the reporting by the mainstream media regarding possible Trump campaign collusion with Russia during the 2016 campaign was described as fake news by Trump on Twitter and in speeches he gave.



Old Media vs. New Media

As the media continues to try to quench Americans' thirst for information, various media conglomerates form, and new kinds of technologies are made available. This has led to the growth of the information superhighway. This “expressway” of information has many different exits. Media conglomerates and the Internet are two of the major characteristics of the information superhighway. The media concentration that exists gives the public access to the highway. The structure can be viewed as three-tiered—an inner, middle, and outer tier. The inner tier consists of the three major networks, cable news channels, the national news magazines, and the four national newspapers (*The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today*), as well as the national wire service, the Associated Press. The middle tier embraces other national newspapers, including *Chicago Tribune*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and other news services as well as magazines with a strong political slant (*New Republic* and *National Review*). The outer tier consists of local newspapers and local television and radio stations. Crossing these tiers is a concentration of power among major media conglomerates such as Gannett and Time Warner, Disney, and 21st Century Fox. The impact of so-called right-wing radio and television commentators such as Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck, and Fox News cannot be underestimated.

Starting in 1996, every major political candidate had a website on the Internet. Candidates also used the Internet for fundraising. In the 2000 election Senator John McCain raised over \$1 million using his website. In 2003, presidential candidate Howard Dean set an Internet fund-raising record. Sites such as *moveon.org* and *meetup.org* have changed the political landscape. Political “blogs” and video sites such as *youtube.com* have had a major impact on voting behavior. As the public has more and more access to information, the media has the potential to influence the way the public thinks. For instance, having the capability to react immediately to an issue raised by using e-mail and social media enables instant polling to take place. Barack Obama notified his supporters of his choice of Senator Joseph Biden as his vice-presidential running mate by text message and e-mail. The Obama campaign utilized the e-mail and cell phone base throughout the 2008 campaign. In 2012, the Obama campaign used social media more effectively than the Romney campaign as a tool to get out their vote. This became a contributing factor in Obama's victory over Governor Romney. If the elections from 2000–2012 represented the movement by

presidential candidates to using social media, the 2016 Trump campaign became the master of social media. Trump had a major presence on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, gaining a record number of followers, and he used those sites to advocate policy positions, criticize his opponents and media, and level personal attacks.

The media, by selecting what individuals and events are covered, also influences what the public perceives as being important. This capability also applies to political leaders. Knowing that they are being broadcast live on C-SPAN certainly encourages House and Senate members to play to a sophisticated TV audience. The White House Office of Communications monitors the media on a daily basis.

The media has also been blamed for the decline of party identification and party politics. Why should an individual get involved with a political party when the interactive media makes it easy not only to access information but also to influence office holders? Candidates and office holders also use the media to get their message out in their high-tech campaigns. They use selective leaks, known as trial balloons, to test the political waters. They become "talking heads," with the media focusing on the face of politicians during speeches, and talk shows often ending up as sound bites. The Internet, thus, certainly is growing in importance, but it may be a double-edged sword. The faster it grows; the less direct control policy makers may have on the thoughts and emotions of the average citizen.

Media Coverage of Campaigns Has Been Criticized by Candidates

Virtually all candidates and every president believe the media is unfair in how they cover a campaign or administration. Many politicians attempt to control and manipulate the media, creating their own media events and photo opportunities. Presidents such as Ronald Reagan have even developed successful strategies to control media access by planning the event, staying on the offensive, controlling the flow of information, limiting access by the media, talking only about the issues the administration wants to talk about, speaking in one voice as an administration, and constantly repeating the same message. This worked for Reagan, but when Clinton attempted to move the White House press out of their briefing room, there was a hostile reaction, forcing the president to back down.

The irony of Clinton's lack of success with the media is that, during the campaign, many believed he was their fair-haired boy. However, statistical studies indicated that on balance, the media covered both Bush and Clinton, praising and criticizing them whenever events dictated. The 2008 presidential campaign raised questions about media coverage of major candidates during the primary and general election. Charges of media bias by the Hillary Clinton campaign during the primaries were echoed by John McCain's campaign during the general election. A study, "Winning the Media Campaign: How the Press Reported the 2008 General Election," was conducted by the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism. Their key findings were that even though Obama's coverage started negatively after his nomination, the media's coverage was much more positive as Obama's poll numbers increased. McCain's coverage became increasingly negative after he suspended his campaign at the start of the economic crisis. Another finding reflected the nature of media coverage being driven by the so-called horse race, that is, which candidate was up, and which candidate was down. Overall, the study found that the "press treatment of Obama had been somewhat more positive than negative, but not markedly so." However, media coverage of McCain was described in the study as "heavily unfavorable." In the 2012 presidential election, the mainstream media covered Governor Romney and President Obama in a fairer manner than did social media.

The 2016 campaign was characterized by criticism of the media for how they covered Donald Trump. They were accused of giving him so much free coverage that he did not have to spend his own money to advertise. The media was also criticized for reducing the campaign to that horse race rather than covering a candidate talking about policies.

Optional Readings

***Understanding the Participatory News, Consumer Pew Trust Report* (March 1, 2010)**

Key Quote:

“To a great extent, people’s experience of news, especially on the internet, is becoming a shared social experience as people swap links in emails, post news stories on their social networking site feeds, highlight news stories in their Tweets, and haggle over the meaning of events in discussion threads.”

Why the Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted, by Malcolm Gladwell* October 4, 2010 *New Yorker Magazine

Key Quote:

“But there is something else at work here, in the outsized enthusiasm for social media. Fifty years after one of the most extraordinary episodes of social upheaval in American history, we seem to have forgotten what activism is.”

Media Bias

The key questions raised regarding coverage are: Is it fair and balanced? And, if there is an editorial stand, does it make a difference? The question of media bias is answered by the media when they point to what they call the canons of good journalism—objectivity and responsible reporting. There has never been any correlation between newspaper endorsements of a political candidate and the candidate winning the election directly because of such endorsements. In addition, legal restraints such as slander and libel laws as well as legislative direction from the FCC force the media to abide by strict standards. During campaigns, the FCC sets down equal-time provisions, which guarantee equal time to all candidates who seek the same office. The Fairness Doctrine, scrapped in 1987, provided that the media air opposing opinions of the same issue. The FCC decided that this provision violated the First Amendment and that, with the proliferation of cable television and the number of talk radio programs, a diversity of opinions are being aired. As a result of the mistakes the media made in reporting the results of the 2000 election, the networks and Congress pledged to review alternatives to exit polls. Suggestions such as a standard time to close the polls nationwide have been discussed.

Investigative and Adversarial Reporting

The rise of investigative reporting and adversarial reporting gave rise to complaints that the media was selectively going after politicians and government officials. Television news magazines such as *60 Minutes* added fuel to the fire.

The turning point for investigative journalism came during the Watergate scandal of the 1970s when Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein of the *Washington Post* “followed the money,” a trail of evidence that led to the president’s reelection committee and ultimately to President Nixon himself. During the 1980s the press pursued the Iran–Contra dealings of Oliver North and took up

Gary Hart's challenge when Hart stated that there was no monkey business in his personal life. The press shot pictures of Hart and Donna Rice on a boat called *Monkey Business*, and his presidential aspirations ended.

During the 1988 campaign President George H. W. Bush told *Nightline* correspondent Ted Koppel that he overstepped his bounds as an impartial moderator. The press also went after the personal indiscretions of cabinet nominee John Tower in 1989 and Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas in 1991. In 1993, in a post-Super Bowl *60 Minutes* broadcast, Bill Clinton was able to defuse the Gennifer Flowers allegation of an affair. And, in 1996, the financial scandals of President Clinton's campaign were deflected by the Democrats.

Government has had to reveal its records to the public as a result of such laws as the 1974 Freedom of Information Act and a number of other "sunshine laws." These acts opened up meetings and made records of the government available to the public and media. In the end, a balance must be reached between the needs of the candidate or the government and the legitimate interests of the media in providing accurate, relevant information to the public.

The Internet has also played a key investigative role. In 1998, before any other traditional media outlet reported the news, Internet gossip columnist Matt Drudge broke the story on his website of Bill Clinton's affair with a White House intern. In twenty years' time, the Internet and the 24/7 news cycle have resulted in one continuous media watch during political campaigns. Blogs have broken news stories, and campaigns have had to react to videos uploaded to YouTube. In 2006, Senator George Allen's campaign was never the same after he referred to somebody filming his speech as "Macaca," a racial slur. The clip was viewed on YouTube millions of times, and Allen lost the election in a very close contest. In 2012, an anonymous person videotaped presidential candidate Mitt Romney at a private fundraising event closed to the press. *Mother Jones* magazine, a liberal publication, found the video on YouTube and got permission to release it. The video exposed Romney saying how 47 percent of Americans did not pay federal income taxes, how they were looking for government handouts, and that this group would never vote for him. These revelations were very harmful to Romney's campaign.

The 2016 campaign had more investigative and adversarial reporting than any previous campaign. Hillary Clinton's e-mail server was scrutinized by the media throughout the campaign. Donald Trump's statements disparaging immigrants, the release of a tape of him making lewd remarks about women, and subsequently women coming forward to accuse him of affairs and sexual assault became fodder for the media. Trump was able to counter these attacks by using his campaign rallies to incite his supporters to come to his defense. The emergence of fake news sites and the release of the personal e-mails of Secretary Clinton's campaign chief by Wikileaks resulted in media coverage that could not always be proven to be accurate.

The President's Relationship with the Media

From the time John Kennedy instituted televised press conferences, to the challenge by Gary Hart to find some personal indiscretion in his private life, to the limited number of press conferences Ronald Reagan wanted, the role of the press has been a double-edged sword for the president. However, suffice it to say that modern presidents rely on the media to tell the story of the president's agenda. The president uses his press secretary and the office of communications to deal directly with the press corps. Using the "bully pulpit," the president is sometimes able to dominate the news cycle.

The press believes it must establish an adversarial relationship with the White House in order to maintain its independence and integrity. Ever since the Woodward-Bernstein investigative reporting that helped bring down the Nixon presidency, presidents have tried to control the media.

There has been the often-described “inside the beltway” coverage of presidential politics versus what the rest of the country views on the evening news. Presidential appearances are designed to maximize the White House’s message. A public-relations strategy by the White House of blaming the media for the nation’s problems has been countered by the press, who claim that they are merely the messengers. Yet the president needs the media to get his message to the American people. The press secretary holds daily press briefings, and reporters are given special invitations for exclusive interviews with the president.

The relationship between the press and the White House has always raised questions about how the press covers the president. Since 1960, when John Kennedy initiated televised press conferences, the White House press corps has had a love-hate relationship with the sitting president. Public polls reflect the sentiment that at times the press is biased against the president, while other polls indicate that the press does not ask tough questions. Most political scientists find there is a balance. When the story calls for investigation, the press usually leads the way. The growth of the “blogosphere” has added to the 24/7 coverage of the presidency. Ever since Watergate, the name *gate* has been attached to presidential coverage: Iran-Contragate, Travelgate, and Nannygate are just a few scandals. The press was relentless in covering the scandal leading to Bill Clinton’s impeachment. This type of coverage has been described as a “media frenzy.”

The Senate convened in January 1999 and, following the same rules that were in place when Andrew Johnson’s impeachment trial took place more than a century earlier, met for nearly two months. The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, William Rehnquist, delivered the final roll call vote on both counts. The Senate voted 55-45 for acquittal on the perjury charges with ten Republicans joining with all 45 Democrats. On the count of obstruction of justice, the Senators voted 50-50. Neither of the charges received the necessary two-thirds majority required, and President Clinton was acquitted.

Public opinion played an important part in the impeachment of the president. Throughout the entire investigation, Clinton’s job-approval ratings were over 60 percent, the highest of any second-term president. His personal approval ratings, however, were well under 40 percent. The public was suggesting that the president’s private life should be separated from his public duties. One of the consequences resulting from the public’s perception of the impeachment inquiry was that the Democrats gained seats in the November midterm election. This was very unusual since, historically, the party in power usually loses seats. As a result of the election, Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich resigned, forcing the Republican majority to select a new speaker.

As much as the press tries to gain access, the president can in the end control the nature of the coverage to a certain extent. For instance, when the marines landed in Somalia for a humanitarian purpose, the Bush administration gave full disclosure, and there was live coverage of the event. On the other hand, during the Gulf War, the media complained that the administration was preventing the press from reporting on it.