IN "MEDIA" RES:

READINGS IN MASS MEDIA AND AMERICAN POLITICS

Jan P. Vermeer

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Edited by
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About the Editor

Jan P. ("John") Vermeer is presently professor of political science at Nebraska Wesleyan University, where he has taught since 1974. In 1990 he won the Sears-Roebuck Foundation Teaching Excellence and Campus Leadership Award. A graduate of the University of California at Santa Barbara, he received both his master's and Ph.D. degrees from the Department of Politics at Princeton University. He has previously published *For Immediate Release: Candidate Press Releases in American Political Campaigns* (Greenwood Press, 1982) and *Campaigns in the News: Mass Media and Congressional Elections* (Greenwood Press, 1987). Vermeer's research interests include public law as well as media and politics. He is currently a member of the editorial board of *The American Review of Politics.*

To Kurt and Mark

Preface

What most undergraduate students know about U.S. government and politics before enrolling in their first political science class they have learned through the media. What most of them will experience about politics in the years after graduation will revolve around news provided by the media. For students, the political world is the world of government and public affairs as reported by the media. Students' interest in political events is piqued by media coverage, and events that receive little mention in newspapers, newsmagazines, and television newscasts are shrugged off as insignificant. Most students interact with the political world around them through the media.

Students are intensely interested in media coverage of politics as a phenomenon. Discussions about media bias, about journalists slanting the news, about clashes between government officials and reporters grasp their attention and generate spirited debate. It seems that virtually every student has an opinion about the relationship between media and politics. Some argue vehemently about a liberal bias in the media, and others argue just as strongly that the media protect existing institutions and political practices by focusing blame for problems on mistakes by individual politicians instead of on the system. But few indeed are neutral.

This book builds on that interest to help instructors introduce students to the study of U.S. government and politics and to use the study of U.S. government and politics to present important issues about the mass media in society today. It should be useful, therefore, in introductory American Government, media and politics, and public opinion courses, as well as in mass media and society and political communication courses in departments of communication. The selections in this book, some by professional political scientists, some by journalists, and others by media scholars and commentators, guide students through the interactions among reporters and officials and provide a basis for judging how media affect politics in the United States. Clearly, the mass media have become important actors in the political system. The general theme running through these readings is that the conduct of politics and public affairs in the United States is greatly affected by the way in which the media report them. The media are in the middle of things in more ways than one.

After an introduction providing an overview of the issues raised in the readings and their interrelationships, Chapter 2 discusses the impact of news-gathering and reporting techniques on the picture of the world we

see in the media. Chapter 3 explores the effect media may have on our basic attitudes and on our opinions on the issues of the day. Chapter 4 presents some perspectives on the news media's relationship to campaigns and elections, at the presidential level, the congressional level, and the state and local levels.

The readings in Chapter 5 provide some evidence that how media report the actions of government influences how public officials act. Their choices, their priorities, and their public actions all reflect their concerns with the media and their news accounts. Chapter 6 excerpts critical passages from important Supreme Court opinions about the legal status of news media, covering such issues as prior restraint, criticism of public officials, and access to the media. The final chapter includes some selections about several widely discussed issues: privacy, abortion, and the Persian Gulf War. A conclusion ties the package together at the end.

The criteria I had in mind when choosing selections for this reader were timeliness, flexibility, solid content, and the potential for generating student interest. Teachers of introductory courses in U.S. government and politics will find that the readings can be adapted to a variety of teaching styles and formats. Some present beginning students with perspectives they have not previously considered, for instance, that some government agencies seek news coverage while others do not. Others provide an opportunity to evaluate contemporary news coverage of political events: how are the media "framing" the president's latest domestic policy initiative? Still others introduce students to widely cited scholarly works, such as Kernell's *Going Public* and Arterton's *Media Politics*. Finally, some selections invite students to consider the nature of news and of news coverage, especially the selections from Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death* and Kamen's "A Matter of 'Live' and Death." In every instance, discussion questions after the readings help students focus their attention on some of the issues involved—these questions could form the basis for in-class discussion, journal entries, short written assignments, or a review for an examination. And of course these readings will be as useful, if not more so, to teachers of mass media and politics courses.

Instructors can profitably assign the readings in various sequences. Many of the selections go together well, even though they fall into different chapters. Reporting wars is covered in the Hallin selection, the Stebenne piece, and the Andrews article, as well as raised in the *Pentagon Papers* case, a part of which is also included. The Shaw article on abortion activists, the nuclear freeze piece about framing, and the Kurtz discussion of health care ads all deal with interest group activity in one way or another. The *Tornillo* case and Diamond's discussion of newspaper endorsements fit together nicely. I urge instructors to explore different combinations to adapt the materials to their courses. Such combinations may indeed help students draw connections they otherwise would not notice.

The selections are taken from a variety of sources, some popular, some scholarly. Overall, they are intended to inform as well as to engage stu-

dents. In general, the pieces included here present perspectives, insights, and conclusions—with only a little of the supporting evidence on which those positions are based. That was a conscious choice. For introductory students, the arguments are more accessible and less technical when presented without the data the authors rely on. For advanced students, instructors can ask them to consider the kind of evidence required to buttress the arguments made in the readings and what evidence would contradict the conclusions the authors have drawn. On occasion, discussion questions at the end of each chapter raise the evidence concern.

My debts to others in preparing this book are great. Nebraska Wesleyan University provided me an E.C. Ames grant and a sabbatical. The Political Science Department at the University of Nebraska—Lincoln, where I spent that sabbatical, was most hospitable, and my discussions with colleagues there were most useful. Among individuals to single out for thanks are John R. Hibbing and Melissa Gates of the University of Nebraska—Lincoln; Michael K. Moore of the University of Texas—Arlington; Robert C. Oberst, Dennis Wakefield, Rick Cypert, and Leon Satterfield, all of Nebraska Wesleyan University; Jay Ovsiovitch, Fort Hays State University; Rebekah Herrick, Oklahoma State University; Trudy V. Selleck, University of California—Riverside; Thomas Patterson, Syracuse University; and the following reviewers: David Bell, Eastern Washington University; Christopher Berkely, Framingham State College; John Boiney, Duke University; Jeri Cabot, College of Charleston; Ken Collier, University of Kansas; John Crow, University of Arizona; David Freeman, Washburn University; David Allen Gawell, University of Texas; Forest Grieves, University of Montana; Theodore Mosch, University of Tennessee; Samuel Pernacciaro, University of Wisconsin–Parkside; Patricia Bayer Richard, Ohio University; Kathleen Ruszay, Kennesaw State College; Mark Wattier, Murray State University; Mark Weaver, Glendale Community College; and Christine Williams, Bentley College. Several years' worth of students at Nebraska Wesleyan University gave me candid responses to these (and other) selections along the way; their insights helped tremendously. At McGraw-Hill, John Bakula, Bert Lummus, Peter Labella, Bill Barter, Fred Burns, and Marsha Scott have been professional, competent, and enormously helpful.

Finally, family: To my father, thanks, for life and love and the opportunity to pursue my dreams. My mother, too, had she lived, deserves my deep gratitude. To Kathy, Kurt, and Mark, who have helped shape who I am and softened the edges in the process, thanks are also due. They've made it possible for me to develop this book. They've made me proud of them; each has contributed something special to my life. This book would not have been the same without you all.

I'll share any credit for this book with every single one of you, but I'll retain all the blame for errors, mistakes, and misstatements. Let's hope there are but few.

Jan P. Vermeer

Contents

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Images of tanks, tents, and troops in Saudi Arabia flashed on our television screens nightly during the recent war in the Persian Gulf, thanks to satellites and videotape. We heard the sounds and saw the scenes experienced by U.S. troops deployed thousands of miles away from home. Even local newscasts regularly gave their viewers a weather report for the Gulf area: hot and dry, with little prospect for cooling. And as we watched, we imagined what it must have been like for our friends, relatives, and fellow citizens serving in the middle of the Gulf war. We began to form our own opinions about President George Bush's decision to take military action to force Iraqi forces from Kuwait.

Would our opinions have been different if we hadn't received nightly images, the regular "Gulf War Updates," the on-camera interviews with soldiers struggling with the conflicting demands of patriotism and duty on the one hand and worry about their personal safety on the other? Would we have considered the situation less critical if we hadn't developed the feeling of immediacy that the extensive broadcast news coverage generated? Would we have been more willing to accept a compromise settling the war if we hadn't gotten hourly updates? Was public opinion, in this case regarding support for the Bush policy in the Arabian Gulf, affected by the fact of media coverage? Do media make a difference?

Obviously, you wouldn't be holding this book in your hands if I thought that media do not make a difference. They do, and in a broad range of areas. In fact, I think it is helpful to think of media as being *in medias res,* Latin for "in the middle of things." A great deal of politics in the United States (and, indeed, elsewhere) today is conducted through the media or is affected by the way the media operate. Some things are not done or they are done differently because of media activities. For instance, a member of the House of Representatives with two simultaneous committee hearings may choose to attend the one more likely to be televised so his or her constituents do not see an empty chair behind the nameplate, even if the member feels the other hearing will deal with more important issues. When officials' choices are so affected, the media definitely have an impact.

But it is an unintentional impact. We need, right from the start, to differentiate media attempts to influence political choices and outcomes from the effect media have when they are reporting events and developments using their standard procedures. An effect then comes as a by-product, nothing more. The difference lies in intent. A lot of commentators will see intent behind any media impact, but media impact is much more likely to occur without any such intent. Media personnel are not unaware of their potential impact, but their decisions are not guided by a choice among different effects. Rather, they make their decisions guided by professional and economic criteria common to journalists: What is news? How much of our resources can we devote to covering this development? How can we keep an audience interested in this story? Reporting the news is the intent; other effects are by-products.

A consensus has developed among reporters about what constitutes news. Although many never succeed in putting it into words, journalists consider developments that involve conflict, have significant impact, involve recognizable people (celebrities, VIPs, and so forth), have recently occurred, and were unexpected as newsworthy. Such events have a much greater chance of being reported as news than developments missing one or more of these elements. Further, the closer to home the event took place, the more likely it will be reported. A car accident that claims one life is news at home, but it would have to claim three lives somewhere else in the state, ten lives elsewhere in the nation, and even more abroad, to be reported as news in our hometowns. Finally, predictable events are more likely to be reported as news than unpredictable ones, because news directors then have time to send television cameras and editors can save space on the paper's front page for the story.

How news is reported can also have an impact. Journalistic norms call for developments to be reported objectively. In effect, objectivity calls for reporters to leave out their personal preferences and perspectives, to report events neutrally, to report both (what if there are more than two?) sides of each issue. As some have said, objective reporting holds a mirror up to reality, so that the public can know what happened by seeing what is reflected in the mirror. Unfortunately, people act differently in front of mirrors than they do elsewhere. (If you doubt that, put a mirror up in an unexpected place and observe how people behave.) And it is impossible for reporters not to be affected by their personal outlooks. For instance, isn't a decision about whether a statement is important enough to be included in a news story affected by a reporter's judgment about what is important and what is unimportant? Objectivity is an ideal, at best.

Media personnel have to make judgments about importance all the time. Some story has to be first on the evening news; some stories have to be put on the front page and others near the classified ads. Those kinds of decisions cannot be avoided, even when journalists recognize that choices about priorities and importance have an impact. That impact, generally, is

on us, on what issues and concerns we consider important and which we consider minor. As Bernard Cohen said years ago, "The press is unable to tell us what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling us what to think about."[1] In other words, the media may be able to influence our perceptions about what is important enough in our surroundings, the locality, the state, the nation, and the world, for us to take into account. We call this effect of the media, "agenda setting." The agenda-setting function of the media refers to the media's ability to generate a list of the issues the public ought to be considering. And I do not see how the media cannot have that effect, even if they wished not to.

Sometimes, too, the media have an effect on how we view the world. Political socialization, transmitting political culture (basic attitudes about the nature of politics and government and about the individual's place in society) from generation to generation, operates through the media as well as the family and schools. When media broadcast criticisms of government policy, we may absorb their implicit standards ourselves, usually without recognizing it. When media portray some political events as exceptions, we begin to form a picture of what "normal" politics consists of. If it is unusual for a local congregation to take a political position, a news story reporting such an action as extraordinary subtly emphasizes for us that churches rarely take public positions. And since we have nationwide media, people in all regions of the country begin to respond to similar perceptions of what it means to be American and what criteria we should apply in judging government activity.

It is not as clear that media can influence public opinion directly. The success of public information campaigns (for instance, "Just Say No," don't smoke, use seat belts, and so forth) varies tremendously. But it is clear that you and I use the media to get information in support of the positions we hold on public issues and that we talk to others about media discussions of issues we are interested in. In addition, interest groups, public relations officers, and people with axes to grind try to get access to news columns and stimulate television coverage in order to influence what we think of the issues of concern to them. And sometimes they are successful. Bankers, for instance, managed a public relations campaign to get Congress to reconsider automatic income tax withholding of savings account interest.[2] When that happens, we have a media impact that is really the product of other people using the media as a channel to reach the public. But the media are an essential element in that process.

Since we know pretty well how media make their choices of developments to report as news (a whole industry—public relations—is built on

[1]Bernard C. Cohen, *The Press and Foreign Policy,* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963, p. 13.

[2]For a discussion of this incident, see Jeffrey M. Berry, *The Interest Group Society,* 2d ed., Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1989, p. 114.

that knowledge), it is not too difficult to find ways to generate news coverage. National nominating conventions, to cite one major example, have evolved over time into quite different events than they were fifty or a hundred years ago. They have adapted themselves to the need to conduct their business in a way that generates favorable media images, attracts a television audience, and still gets the work of the party done. Although they are still "party events," national conventions are "media events," too, and significantly so.

Generating news coverage is nowadays the essence of campaigns. You are probably most familiar with the role of the mass media in elections and in presidential elections specifically. Here candidates plan extensive campaigns to solicit electoral support, and reaching voters through the media is the focal point of their efforts. In winning the nomination, candidates must try to distinguish themselves from other hopefuls, build name recognition, gather momentum, and influence the media's expectations about the outcome of primary elections. It doesn't do much good to win 40 percent of the vote, more than any other candidate in the primary, and be considered a loser because reporters expected you to win 50 percent or more.

Presidential campaigns orchestrate advertising campaigns (paid media) and publicity campaigns (free media) to reach as many voters as possible while retaining as much control over the content of the messages they send as possible. Let me put that in different words: Presidential campaigners try to manipulate the media into reporting what they want them to report in a way most helpful to the campaign. And so advance people for campaigns will limit television cameras to locations that will yield the most favorable pictures for the campaign. And candidates will hop from television market to television market in their travels, appearing in telegenic settings that reflect the themes their campaigns are stressing. Of course, there's nothing new here, as the old picture of staid Calvin Coolidge looking unhappy in an Indian headdress in the 1920s indicates. What is new is the range of media available for exploitation: talk shows, viewer call-in shows, interview shows, even entertainment shows, such as *The Arsenio Hall Show.*

Generating news coverage is more difficult but no less important for candidates for Congress. They are substantially less prominent than presidential candidates. Frequently, aspiring legislators running against incumbents pose only minor challenges, with little chance to generate the kind of media coverage that will significantly increase their name recognition. For candidates for the House of Representatives, especially, the disparity between their district's boundaries and the reach of television stations in the area (the "media market") is great. A candidate for the House from a district in Manhattan who wants to use television will have to pay advertising rates based on an audience that includes all of New York City and its northern suburbs, a large segment of New Jersey, and a significant portion of Connecticut. Only a small portion of these people can vote in the candi-

date's district. The same rationale restricts news coverage local newspapers give the candidates—most of the paper's readers are not interested in the race.

When candidates have won office, when they have become legislators, governors, presidents, senators, and representatives, they quickly discover that the media still play a major role in their lives. The press especially likes to cover the president, reporting the trivial as well as the important. For instance, the morning of President Nixon's resignation on August 9, 1974, the media reported to the nation that their next president, then-Vice President Ford, fixed his own breakfast that morning: an English muffin and orange juice. Wherever the president goes, at least a small segment of the White House press corps goes too, known irreverently as the "body watch." Why? So that the media would be there to record anything newsworthy that might happen to the president, from a stumble over a curb to an assassination attempt. No other public official lives and works in such a fishbowl.

The impact of the media on the functioning of the presidency, however, is more important than this trivial reporting of a celebrity. The White House is a convenient "beat" to cover, with many significant developments occurring there regularly. The White House exterior makes an impressive backdrop for stand-up television news reports. What also makes the White House attractive to media reporters is the fact that there is a single spokesperson for the executive branch there—the president. In Congress, competing voices, usually from people the public doesn't readily recognize, make it more difficult for reporters to cover. And so there is an understandable tendency for the media to center their Washington reporting on the White House, and much of our national political news originates there.

For a president, that is convenient and useful. Whenever presidents want to make announcements they need only to walk out to the press center, and they can be sure of finding representatives of all major media (as well as a horde of reporters from less important outlets) eager to report the news. Because so much presidential news is generated within the White House, reporters assigned the White House beat rarely need to seek outside sources. Presidents, therefore, can be assured that their perspectives are likely to be dominant in the stories reporters file. The media's preoccupation with the presidency further increases the likelihood that the president's point of view will be emphasized in the news of the day. Press releases, briefings, and public statements, all coming out of the White House Press Office, are all carefully orchestrated to present the president's work in a good public light in order to build popular support for his or her policies and actions.

It doesn't always work, and some presidents wind up seeing the White House press corps as opponents. Critical reports and interpretations of the news that dispute official explanations can draw presidential fire. One way presidents try to retain control over the "spin" of the news they generate is

to go over the heads of reporters to the public directly. Public appearances and national television addresses, even press conferences, allow presidents to speak to citizens without having their messages diluted, interpreted, and analyzed by the White House press. Members of local media tend to be much less critical of presidential actions and to report presidential actions favorably. Nowadays presidents do not restrict their efforts to reach the public to dealing with the White House press corps, despite the extra effort and resources required. President Clinton, especially, has gone to great length to exploit the potential in local media coverage.

In contrast, coverage of Congress is much more difficult for the media. The complexity of the legislative process, the large number of representatives and senators, and the ambiguity of much congressional action all contribute to the difficulty of the task. Unlike the White House, where the press secretary's office may delay releasing news about minor developments in order to focus press attention on what the president considers the major story of the day, a variety of events may occur simultaneously in Congress: a vote on final passage of a tax bill in the Senate, a conference committee meeting on reconciling competing versions of a House and Senate bill on controlling acid rain, a subcommittee hearing in the House, a press conference by the Senate majority leader, or a debate about a cabinet appointment in the Senate. And on all these and other matters, different legislators may be the "authoritative" source, the right person to quote. Few journalists know enough about all 535 representatives and senators to know who to see on more than four or five subjects, not to mention the hundreds of issues that arise in Congress every year. Further, the essence of Congress centers on its process, whereas journalistic conceptions of news center on results. A long, drawn-out debate in Congress may be important to the final form a bill may take, but that debate is rarely pithy enough, dramatic enough, newsworthy enough to warrant much press attention. Congress is therefore much more difficult for news media personnel to cover.

However, individual members of Congress need media coverage. In order to raise their policy concerns to a higher priority for their colleagues—in order, in other words, for members to force the House to take action on their bills—members frequently try to generate news coverage. The combination of factors that makes such action successful is hard to manipulate. When media concerns and member interests coincide, sometimes fortuitously, a senator or representative can successfully call enough attention to an issue to have it addressed by the chamber. When such a combination of circumstances arises, a member must strike quickly, or the window of opportunity will close.

Members need coverage of their activities by their state media as well. Here members hold most of the cards. It is exceedingly difficult for local media to obtain news reports of their local member's actions. Consequently, many local outlets rely heavily on member-produced communi-