

U.S. Media and Elections in Flux

Dynamics and Strategies

David A. Jones



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First published 2016
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Names: Jones, David A. (David Adam), 1965-

Title: U.S. media and elections in flux : dynamics and strategies /
David A. Jones.

Other titles: United States media and elections in flux

Description: New York, NY : Routledge, 2016.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015035508 | ISBN 9781138777293 (hardback) |

ISBN 9781138777309 (pbk.) | ISBN 9781315772721 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Mass media--Political aspects--United States. |

Communication in politics--United States. | Elections--United States. |

Political campaigns--United States.

Classification: LCC P95.82.U6 J67 2016 | DDC 324.7/30973--dc23

LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015035508>

ISBN: 978-1-138-77729-3 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-138-77730-9 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-77272-1 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo

by Taylor & Francis Books

U.S. MEDIA AND ELECTIONS IN FLUX

Paid, earned, and social media are all crucial elements of modern electioneering, yet there is a scarcity of supplementary texts for campaigns and election courses that cover all types of media. Equally, media and politics courses cover election-related topics, yet there are few books that cover these subjects comprehensively.

This brief and accessible book bridges the gap by discussing media in the context of U.S. elections. David A. Jones divides the book into two parts, with the first analyzing the wide array of media outlets citizens use to inform themselves during elections. Jones covers traditional, mainstream news media and opinion/entertainment-based media, as well as new media outlets such as talk shows, blogs, and late-night comedy programs. The second half of the book assesses how campaigns and candidates have adapted to the changing media environment. These chapters focus on earned media strategies, paid media strategies, and social media strategies.

Written in a concise and accessible style, while including recent scholarly research, the book will appeal to students with its combination of academic rigor and readability. *U.S. Media and Elections in Flux* will be a useful supplementary textbook for courses on campaigns and elections, media and politics, and introductory American politics.

David A. Jones is Professor of Political Science at James Madison University.

“‘Stay tuned.’ That’s the book’s closing sentence, and one of the most prescient such sentences ever. David Jones has masterfully captured the dynamic and evolving role of the media in U.S. elections. The book is a must read for any citizen, journalist, politician, scholar, or student who seeks to understand the nature of contemporary election communication.”

Thomas E. Patterson, *Harvard University*

“David Jones has written a lively book about the media in flux. He does a great job capturing all the extraordinary changes that have taken place in earned, paid, and social media. Students will gain a deep understanding of the shifting communications landscape.”

Darrell West, *Brookings Institution*

“Jones offers an invaluable glimpse into contemporary political communication research. The content is at once complex and accessible, with current examples that will draw readers in and hold them tight. Amply documented, with invitations for deeper probing, *U.S. Media and Elections in Flux* provides the tools needed for a sophisticated exploration of political campaigns in an increasingly messy media environment.”

Stephen Maynard Caliendo, *North Central College*

“This book takes a complicated, and ever-changing, area of American electoral politics and breaks it down in such a way that both the expert and novice have much to gain from reading it. I highly recommend it for courses in campaigns and elections, mass media and politics, and public opinion.”

Jeffrey L. Bernstein, *Eastern Michigan University*

For Wendy and Alex

CONTENTS

<i>List of boxes</i>	<i>viii</i>
Introduction	1
1 The News Media	6
2 New Options	27
3 Earned Media	46
4 Paid Media	63
5 Social Media	83
Conclusion	103
<i>Index</i>	<i>109</i>

BOXES

1.1	Liberal Media?	12
2.1	Fey–Palin, Palin–Fey	39
3.1	Damage Control	51
4.1	Spot Checks	73
5.1	(Twitter) Birds on the Bus	93

INTRODUCTION

“Study: Major Shift in Media Landscape Occurs Every 6 Seconds,” reads the headline in *The Onion*, the website that spoofs the news media. It’s a joke, of course. But like all good satire, the story contains an element of truth. When it goes on to say that “the way information is transmitted and received in our culture is radically altered over 10 separate times in one minute,” the only exaggeration may be the word “minute.”¹

The media landscape in the United States has shifted dramatically in the past few years, and the pace of change is breathtaking. These changes have altered the way Americans experience elections—the keystone of representative democracy. Despite these changes, however, what voters see, hear and read about elections remains the product of a push and pull between traditional news outlets and the candidates and campaigns they cover. Social media, talk shows and other forms of “new media” have shaken things up—fundamentally, in some ways—yet many voters still rely on television and newspapers to inform themselves, sometimes inadvertently. It is thus crucial to understand what conventional election news coverage looks like, how it gets produced, and the strategies and tactics campaigns employ to shape that coverage.

It is also important that a growing number of Americans supplement their election news diet with relatively novel alternative media outlets. Talk shows on cable television and radio attract relatively small, narrow audiences of like-minded people who seek out opinionated analysis of elections on a national and sometimes state level. Blogs and other internet sources aggregate news and opinion for even narrower audiences. Late-night comedy programs entertain and inform their audiences by mocking the candidates and the journalists who cover them. Meanwhile, with all these new choices available, many Americans opt out completely and do not vote.

Also changing are the ways in which people encounter election-related news, opinion and entertainment. Some people still read the morning paper or watch the evening news on television. But for a growing number of Americans, their first encounter with a story is when a friend shares a link on Facebook or a headline pops up on their Twitter feed. Others, especially older Americans, forward email messages to each other as a means of sharing content that traditional media outlets may ignore.

The changing media environment has important implications for campaign strategy. TV ads are no longer limited to television; now they are posted online and circulated by supporters. Opinion and entertainment-based media outlets give candidates more opportunities to reach voters more directly and informally. Social media platforms make the communication process more horizontal, empowering activists, volunteers and voters to provide and share a larger portion of information. Yet campaigns cannot completely bypass mainstream news outlets, much as many of them would like to. Journalists take their jobs very seriously. Elections thrive when voters are well-informed about the candidates and issues at stake, and it remains the responsibility of journalists to scrutinize the candidates' record, behavior and performance, among other things. Campaigns must—and do—work with the news media, and savvy campaigns manage the media in ways that account for the norms and needs of modern journalists. Campaigns also must continue to spend at least half of their campaign contributions on old-fashioned TV ads.

The purpose of this book is two-fold: (1) to survey the ever-changing media landscape in the context of elections in the United States, and (2) to assess how campaigns have adapted to these changes in terms of “earned media” and “paid media” strategies. Underlying the analysis are two general arguments:

1. Traditional news organizations remain the most important sources of election information for most Americans. Campaigns still expend a great deal of time and energy shaping how their candidates get covered in newspapers and on television. New opinion and entertainment-based media outlets depend on the basic reporting and news content provided by traditional media outlets, not the other way around.
2. Yet the top-down model of news providing is being replaced by a more horizontal process that gives citizens more control over the information they receive. A growing number of Americans get their election news “on demand” rather than “by appointment.” It is easier for people to seek out media outlets that complement—rather than challenge—their existing opinions. And social networking outlets foster information sharing among rank-and-file voters, activists, volunteers, and the campaigns they support.

The book is split into five chapters. Chapters 1–2 examine the content providers that inform, entertain, affirm and even persuade voters during election season.

Chapter 1 focuses on traditional news media, particularly newspapers and television news programs. These outlets are commonly referred to as the mainstream media, abbreviated MSM. On what aspects of the elections do MSM focus? More importantly, why? In other words, what explains traditional media's tendency to focus less on the candidates' policy ideas and more on the "horse race"—who is ahead, who is behind, and the strategies and tactics the campaigns are employing to help them win? What explains the negative tone that characterizes so much of election news? When candidates make mistakes or get caught in a scandalous act, a media "feeding frenzy" usually ensues—days if not weeks of round-the-clock news coverage of the misdeed and what it means for the candidate's chances. Why do some blunders get more coverage than others? How do voters respond to these feeding frenzies?

This chapter will include a special section on what is perhaps the most compelling question surrounding news coverage of elections: Are traditional media biased toward Democratic candidates and the policies they espouse? In 2008, content analysis reveals that news coverage was much more generous toward Barack Obama than John McCain. How much of this was a product of "liberal bias," and how much of it stemmed from other media biases? In answering these questions, this chapter—along with subsequent ones—will go beyond conventional wisdom and speculation and dig deeply into the latest academic research on these subjects. In addition to describing patterns of traditional election news coverage, it will employ the research to offer explanations for these patterns. In other words, it will answer not only the "what?" questions, but it will also explore the "why?" and the "how?"

Chapter 2 turns to relatively new content providers. Many Americans now supplement their MSM diet with alternative outlets, especially during election season. Some of these outlets seek to entertain through political humor on late-night comedy such as *The Daily Show* on Comedy Central and *Saturday Night Live* on NBC. Young voters rely heavily on these sources for political information, raising questions about how informative they are and whether their parody shapes voters' impressions of the candidates. But this chapter is mostly concerned with opinion-based sources—talk shows on radio and television as well as blogs and other websites that filter election news through a partisan lens. Nationally syndicated talk radio has been an electoral force at least since the early 1990s. On cable television, Fox News and MSNBC provide elections news that may—or may not—carry a partisan tilt, but the bread-and-butter of these networks are the highly charged talk shows aired during prime time. On the internet, voters can get their election news filtered through partisan news aggregators such as *The Huffington Post* and *The Drudge Report*. Opinion-based media outlets attract small but loyal audiences of mostly like-minded people. Their growth gives Americans more opportunities to selectively expose themselves to news and opinion that is compatible with their existing worldview. How many Americans actually take advantage of these enhanced opportunities for selective exposure? For the people who do tune in, how impactful are these outlets in general and during elections in particular,

especially in light of the like-minded nature of their audiences? To what extent do they push their already partisan audiences further to the extremes?

By the end of Chapter 2, readers will have gained an understanding of the modern media environment, both in terms of its dramatic transformation as well as its more static qualities. Part II of the book shifts to what all of this means for campaign strategy. In addition to academic research, Chapters 3–5 will draw upon insights provided by campaign professionals. In Chapter 3, the subject is how campaigns and candidates manage the news—what campaign professionals call earned media strategies. One approach has been to bypass traditional news organizations as much as possible and instead reach voters through friendly opinion-based media and entertainment outlets. But as Chapter 1 reminds us, traditional media outlets cannot be ignored. Readers will be introduced to a wide range of approaches ranging from standard press conferences, photo-ops and press releases to candidate appearances on talk shows. The chapter includes a box on “Damage Control,” which reviews the practices that campaigns employ when their candidate gets caught on camera making a controversial statement or is embroiled in a scandal. In addition, readers will see that campaigns attempt to shape media coverage by: (1) managing expectations about how well candidates might do in debates and other highly mediated events and (2) controlling journalists’ direct access to the candidate.

Whereas earned media is sometimes called “free media,” campaigns spend most of the money they raise on what is aptly called “paid media,” primarily television advertising. Compared with the chaos of earned media, campaigns have much more control over all aspects of this form of communication with voters. But is it money well spent? What impact does campaign advertising have on the attitudes and behavior of voters? Chapter 4 explores this question by synthesizing the latest academic research on the subject with examples from recent national, state and local elections. It also examines trends in the content, format and placement of campaign advertising. Voters say they loathe negative ads, but campaign professionals are convinced that they work. Does academic research support this assumption? In 2012, both presidential campaigns spent millions on television advertising, nearly all of it negative, but the Obama team used targeted ad buys made in advance to get more for their money while the Romney campaign paid top dollar for prime-time slots. Did these efficiencies help Obama win the election? Results are mixed, as we will see in Chapter 4.

Campaigns are turning to social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to compensate for some of the pitfalls of conventional earned and paid media. On social media, ads and other communication may be microtargeted to individual voters whose political views and behavior have been revealed by their online activity. Rather than pay tens of thousands of dollars to run a 30-second spot on television, a campaign may post it—or longer versions of it—on YouTube and encourage its supporters to share with their Facebook friends and Twitter followers. If the video is controversial or unusually clever, it might get covered in the news

media or discussed on a talk show. As a result, the video can be viewed by thousands of voters without the campaign buying much if any airtime. Chapter 5 examines this and other ways that campaigns are using social media to bypass conventional outlets and reach voters online, either directly or through their online networks. Readers will see social media help campaigns enlist supporters to raise money, persuade undecided voters, and mobilize other likely supporters to the polls. In addition to anecdotal evidence from recent elections, it will draw upon research examining the effects of social media on information flow, perceptions of candidates and voter mobilization.

Elections remain largely mediated experiences. In other words, much of what Americans experience during the course of an election campaign happens through various media, new and old. This book explores what modern mediated elections look and sound like and how the campaigns themselves attempt to shape these elemental communication processes. Campaigns have struggled to keep up with the constantly changing media environment, as have the media outlets themselves. The conclusion summarizes these transformations, then turns to a few emerging trends and events that suggest additional shake-ups. By the time readers finish this book, the electoral implications of these phenomena may be readily apparent.

Note

- 1 "Study: Major Shift in Media Landscape Occurs Every 6 Seconds." *The Onion*, November 28, 2013. <http://www.theonion.com/articles/study-major-shift-in-media-landscape-occurs-every,34690/?ref=auto>

1

THE NEWS MEDIA

By most measures, the news media are in deep trouble. Newspaper circulation has declined steadily for two decades, as have audience ratings for television news. Both are losing eyes and ears to talk shows and other opinion-based outlets, which are attracting small but growing audiences of highly engaged citizens. Many younger voters are getting their “news” from late-night comedy and other entertainment-oriented programming (Chapter 2). A swiftly growing number of Americans are getting their election news via Facebook, Twitter and other online social media platforms (Chapter 5). News organizations have adapted by massively escalating their online presence, allowing them to preserve and sometimes expand their audiences. But online advertising has fallen short for news organizations: there is plenty of it, but it earns nowhere near the revenue of conventional print ads and TV spots.

All of this means that campaigns can ignore the news media, right? Not so fast. Many voters still watch and read “the news” and turn to traditional media outlets to provide it. According to the 2013 report on “The State of the News Media” by Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism, newspaper circulation may have stabilized after many years of steady decline. In 2012, about 22 million people reported watching the evening news on either ABC, CBS or NBC—down only slightly from 2008. Local television viewership dropped more sharply during that period, but nearly half of respondents reported that they still watch their local news regularly (Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism 2013a). Most Americans over the age of 50 remain regular viewers of television news (Pew 2013a) and—as any campaign professional will tell you—these people vote regularly. Overall, although the report paints a disturbing portrait of steady decline, its findings remind us that traditional news media are still crucial sources of information during elections.

Indeed, for media coverage of major election-related events, live television is still where mass audiences gather. In 2012, for example, election night news coverage by the network and cable news networks attracted 66.8 million viewers during prime time, only slightly less than the record audience of 71.5 million people who watched televised news coverage of Barack Obama's historic victory in 2008 (Stelter 2012a). The first debate between Obama and Mitt Romney was watched by 67.2 million people on television at home—the largest audience for a first debate since the 1980 matchup between Ronald Reagan and then-President Jimmy Carter (Stelter 2012b).

It is true that the ground has shifted. As we will see in subsequent chapters, social media platforms and other online media outlets provide a relatively cost-effective means of bypassing the news media and communicating with voters directly. Yet without traditional news organizations, there wouldn't be much news to opine about on a talk show or blog, spoof on late-night comedy, tweet on Twitter, or share on Facebook. Journalists, whether they work for a traditional news outlet or an online startup, provide nearly all the original reporting that makes up the news. For this reason alone, maintaining a working relationship with professional reporters remains the most important part of a campaign's "earned media" strategy. It thus makes sense to develop a comprehensive understanding of how journalists cover elections, why they cover elections in these ways, and the impact of modern election news coverage on how voters think and behave.

Who Are the News Media?

This chapter focuses on the *news media*. These are media outlets that are primarily concerned with providing the news—that is, information about current events—as reported by professional journalists. Traditionally the news media are also called the “press,” a holdover from when most journalists worked for newspapers. Today they are commonly referred to as the mainstream media (sometimes abbreviated as the MSM). On the print side, examples include daily newspapers, the most prominent of which serve both a local and national audience—e.g., *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*—or are purely national in scope—e.g., *The Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today*. The Associated Press and other wire services supply national and international news stories to local newspapers and websites around the country. On television, examples of the news media include local television news broadcasts, the nightly network news, and the news operations of 24-hour cable news channels. All of these news media outlets have a significant presence online in the form of websites, Facebook pages, and Twitter feeds. Indeed, these outlets now reach most of their readers and viewers online.

News media outlets are staffed by journalists—reporters, editors, producers, etc.—who work together to produce “stories” about current events. Journalists are professionally trained in their craft, and that training includes an emphasis on

professional norms. The most important norm is to cover the news *objectively*—that is, in an even-handed, neutral, fair and balanced or non-partisan fashion. Objectivity emerged as a journalistic norm in the 20th century, and it did so for a variety of reasons. This was the century of the “mass media,” when audiences were huge and politically diverse. By covering political events in a neutral manner, media outlets could present the news without offending large portions of their audience. After World War II, the Federal Communications Commission implemented the Fairness Doctrine, which required television and radio broadcasters to cover controversial information in a balanced manner—a regulation that remained in place until the late 1980s. Meanwhile, journalism was shifting from a blue-collar profession to one that required a college degree, and the journalism schools (“J-schools”) that attracted many would-be reporters, editors and producers reinforced objectivity and other professional norms (West 2001).

Today, it seems hopelessly naïve to think anyone—even a trained reporter—could report the news objectively. Even so, it remains a goal of most professional journalists. This professional norm sets journalists apart from talk show hosts and bloggers, who are primarily concerned with expressing their opinions or interpreting the news in a one-sided, sometimes inflammatory fashion.

For all their faults, journalists are also keen to provide good “newsworthy” stories that are fair, accurate and important—or, “buzzworthy,” to use the contemporary term. Sometimes they are driven by selfish motivations: they strive for professional prestige by authoring stories that lead the news broadcast or appear on the front page; stories that go viral on social media; stories that win journalism awards. Yet these selfish motivations are not always incompatible with the needs of a democratic society. Democracies need their media to, at minimum, inform citizens about public affairs and scrutinize the actions of the powerful. Modern journalists are motivated to produce rigorously reported news stories that “make a difference.” Their role models are more likely to be Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, the *Washington Post* reporters who broke the Watergate story, not Fox News talk show host Bill O'Reilly or MSNBC's Rachel Maddow.

It is also true, however, that most journalists in the United States work for profit-seeking news organizations that are part of a larger corporation. The largest newspaper chain, Gannett, owns *USA Today* and a variety of local newspapers, as well as 43 television stations across the country. Comcast isn't just a cable and internet provider—it also owns NBC, MSNBC, and 24 local television stations. Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation has an enormous global reach—in the U.S., News Corp. holdings include Fox News on cable television, the Fox broadcast network, and *The Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Post* newspapers. CBS Corporation owns not only the broadcast network (including CBS News) but also 29 local television stations and 130 CBS radio affiliates. ABC is owned by Disney. In 2012, Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway Company bought 23 daily newspapers from the troubled Media General Company chain. Other news organizations are privately owned, including *The Washington Post*, purchased in 2013

by Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*, the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*, and the *Columbus Dispatch* in Ohio.

The bottom line: nearly all news organizations in the U.S. are businesses, and businesses strive to make profits. That means generating sufficient revenue while controlling costs. And since most news organizations are part of publicly traded corporations, it isn't enough to merely make a profit—they are pressured to enhance the company's ability to *increase* profits over time.

The problem is, two-thirds of the news revenue comes from advertising (Pew 2013a), and advertising revenue has dropped sharply since the 1990s, especially for newspapers. Newspapers have been devastated by the nearly complete loss of classified advertising to Craigslist and other online sources. They also have been hard hit by declines in industries that had spent heavily on print advertising for much of the 20th century: department stores and auto dealers. Newspapers have expanded their readership online, but online advertising revenues are nowhere near enough to compensate. According to one study, for every \$1 gained in online advertising revenue, newspapers have lost \$7 in print advertising (Pew 2013b). Meanwhile, television news audiences are aging, which means news programs are less attractive to advertisers aiming to reach viewers between the ages of 25 and 54—widely seen as the “sweet spot” for consumer spending. Once a source of huge profits for media corporations, advertising revenue for television news is now flat (Pew 2013a).

Faced with a grim revenue situation, media outlets have cut costs by scaling back their news operations. The number of full-time editorial jobs at newspapers plummeted from 56,400 in 2001 to 36,700 in 2014, according to the American Society of Newspaper Editors (2014). The *Star-Ledger*, New Jersey's largest newspaper, cut 25 percent of its newsroom staff in April 2014. The New Orleans *Times Picayune* cut half of its newsroom staff in 2012. Even *The New York Times* has eliminated newsroom positions. The *Washington Post* editorial staff has been cut dramatically.

Naturally, these cutbacks have had a negative impact on news coverage of elections. Presidential campaigns still get intense, round-the-clock scrutiny. But local news media now lack the reporting resources to thoroughly cover state, local and Congressional elections. Stretched thin across multiple beats, many local newspaper and television reporters have neither the time nor the incentives to develop a particular expertise. Instead, much of the shrinking news hole for election news is filled by stories supplied by wire services, especially the Associated Press, which naturally are less equipped to provide local news. The 2002 race for governor of California was the focus of less than one percent of local news broadcast in the month of October (Iyengar 2011). According to one study, 92 percent of local news broadcasts in the month before the 2004 elections contained *no stories at all* about campaigns for the U.S. House and state and local offices. Based on content analysis of local news broadcasts in 11 media markets, this study reported that TV stations ran five times more paid advertisements by House and Senate candidates