

*Fourth Edition*

# MASS MEDIA AND AMERICAN POLITICS



*DORIS A. GRABER*

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# **Mass Media and American Politics**

**FOURTH EDITION**

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## PREFACE

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The mass media play a central and ever-growing role in the conduct of American politics. The primary reasons are the growth of new media technologies such as cable and satellite television transmission; business mergers involving the electronic media and newspaper chains; and the deregulation of the communications industry during the Reagan and Bush administrations. Last, but by no means least, the battle between journalists and politicians for control over news content has escalated sharply.

To report and analyze these major continuing changes and their impact on politics and political news requires revision of this book at frequent intervals. The 1993 edition, besides describing the current media scene, incorporates important advances in the study of the influence of the media. It also analyzes media content in previously unexplored areas of politics. Many of the new data come from my own research on the media's impact on politics, particularly through television news. Political events and research findings have been updated, and fresh examples have replaced older ones throughout the book.

Although much has changed since the original publication of *Mass Media and American Politics* in 1980, the basic features of the interrelation between mass media and American politics have remained the same. This stands as a testimony to the maturity of the relationship. Therefore, the basic organizational structure of the book has been retained, albeit with some rearrangement of the chapter order. While the book discusses all of the mass media, the primary emphasis remains on news produced by television and newspapers because these are the chief sources of current information for people both in public and private life. Magazines and radio play a distinctly subordinate role.

In the past, most research has been limited to the relationship between media and politics during elections. This pattern continues, although it has become less pronounced. As the references in the text and in the suggested readings at the end of each chapter indicate, the scope of research has broadened over time. However, most of these recent studies are specialized, focusing on single segments of the total

picture. Hence, the need still exists for a comprehensive, up-to-date college level textbook that provides an overview of the entire media field from a primarily political perspective. The fourth edition of *Mass Media and American Politics* serves that purpose.

Chapters 1 and 2 examine the mass media as institutions in the American political system and show how the media are both influenced by and reflect that system. Chapter 3 completes the discussion of the legal and political framework in which American media operate. It describes the legal rights of ordinary citizens, public officials, and newspeople to obtain and publish information and to be protected from damaging publicity.

Chapters 4 and 5 deal with newsmaking under ordinary and extraordinary circumstances, such as natural disasters and wars. Media structures, personnel, and operations are analyzed, and the impact they have on media content is explained and assessed. Investigative reporting and its influence on public policy is discussed in Chapter 6. The wealth of new information about political learning and opinion formation is explored in Chapter 7, along with new theories about media-induced asocial and prosocial behavior. Much of this material is based on my own research and on research undertaken jointly with Maxwell E. McCombs, currently at the University of Texas at Austin, and David H. Weaver, currently at Indiana University.

The powerful influence of the media in a variety of political situations is the subject of Chapters 8 through 11. These situations include media coverage of elections (Chapter 8), and the interplay between the media and major political institutions such as the presidency and Congress (Chapter 9). A new chapter covers the media's role in the judicial system more extensively than before and adds information about state and local news (Chapter 10). Chapter 11 details the steadily growing part that media play in the conduct of foreign policy. The book concludes with a discussion of policy trends and the new technologies and political forces shaping them (Chapter 12).

Besides the relentless march of political and technological events that dictated changes, the shape of the new edition owes much to colleagues and students who have commented on the book and to the scholars whose research has provided new insights. Their contributions are deeply appreciated. Special thanks are due to Edie N. Goldenberg, University of Michigan, and William C. Adams, George Washington University, for reading the original manuscript with exceptional care and making very constructive comments. The fourth edition was improved by the careful critiques by Robert Sahr, Oregon State University; Herbert Waltzer, Miami University of Ohio; and an anonymous reviewer. These scholars will surely recognize that most of their suggestions have been implemented.

I am also indebted to my research assistants, especially Laurent Pernot and Leta Dally. They tracked down many elusive references and data and contributed to the new research presented in the book. Whatever errors have crept into this new and heavily revised edition are my responsibility, of course—although the proverbial gremlins really did it. That there are not more mistakes is due to the watchful eyes of Debbie Hardin and Ann O'Malley who edited the final version of the manuscript. Brenda Carter, acquisitions editor for CQ Press, and the team she heads provided invaluable support that greatly eased the many chores entailed in book production. The concern and friendship of the CQ crew have been real morale boosters.

The time required to write books or complete extensive revisions is usually taken from the category labeled "family time." When it is willingly and even cheerfully surrendered by those who hold claim to it, research and writing progress with a minimum of emotional strain. Family time donated to a book is a generous, treasured gift. I am grateful to my family for this indispensable contribution to my work and for the love and understanding that it represents.

*Doris A. Graber*

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## CHAPTER 1

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# Media Power and Government Control

On March 3, 1991, after a high-speed chase, several officers of the Los Angeles police stopped an African-American motorist for traffic violations. An angry confrontation ensued that ended with the white officers severely beating the motorist. A resident of a nearby apartment building, alerted by the noise, videotaped scenes of the beating. Over the course of the next year, the shocking footage was broadcast thousands of times throughout the nation, creating a widespread consensus among citizens of all races that the police had used excessive force. Police brutality and racism became simmering public issues, kept alive by the repeated airing of the taped scenes.

When news reports informed Americans at the end of April 1992 that an all-white jury had exonerated all but one of the Los Angeles officers on the charges of brutality, protest demonstrations pockmarked the country. In Los Angeles those demonstrations turned into one of the ugliest urban riots in decades, complete with shootings, beatings, massive arson, and looting. Fifty-three people were killed, and more than 2,000 were injured. Millions of dollars worth of property was destroyed, leaving sections of the city an economic wasteland. In the wake of the rioting, the focus of the ongoing presidential campaign turned to the hitherto neglected problems of urban decay and the alienated, impoverished underclass.

## Political Importance of Mass Media

The impact of television on racial harmony and the fate of America's cities is but one example of how mass media, in combination

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with other political factors, can influence American politics. How journalists cover stories often plays a crucial part in shaping the perceptions of reality of millions of people in all walks of life. News stories, as seen through the eyes of reporters, take Americans to the battlefields of the world in Central America or the Middle East. They give them ringside seats for space shuttle launches or Arctic submarine patrols. They provide the nation with shared political experiences, such as watching presidential election debates or congressional investigations, that then form a basis for public opinions and for uniting people for political actions.<sup>1</sup>

The media often serve as attitude and behavior models. In the process of image creation, the media indicate which views and behaviors are acceptable and even praiseworthy in a given society and which are unacceptable or outside the mainstream. Audiences can learn how to conduct themselves in ordinary social and work situations, how to cope with personal crises, and how to evaluate major social institutions like the medical profession or the police. Media stories also indicate what is deemed important or unimportant by various groups of elites, what conforms to prevailing standards of justice and morality, and how events are related to each other.<sup>2</sup> In the process the media present a set of cultural values that their audiences are likely to accept in whole or in part as typical of American society. The media thus help to integrate and homogenize American society.

Attention to the mass media is all-pervasive among twentieth-century Americans. The average high school graduate nowadays has spent more time in front of a television set than in school, much of it during preschool and elementary school days. Even in school much learning about current events is based on information provided by the media. As adults, Americans spend nearly half of their leisure time watching television, listening to the radio, or reading newspapers and magazines. Averaged out over an entire week, this amounts to more than seven hours of exposure per day to some form of mass media news or entertainment. Television occupies three-fourths of this time.<sup>3</sup> With access to cable and satellite television, as well as video recorders that can store programs for delayed viewing, these figures are rising. Despite considerable dissatisfaction with the quality of television programs, television is the primary source of news and entertainment for the average American. It is also the most trusted source of information.

On a typical evening 98 million people, nearly half the country's population, are watching television between 8:00 and 9:00 P.M. If a "special" is broadcast, as many as 75 million to 80 million people may watch it.<sup>4</sup> In 1988 the debates between presidential candidates Michael Dukakis and George Bush were watched by 160 million Americans, not to mention millions of foreign viewers. The ability to attract such vast

audiences of ordinary people, as well as political elites, constitutes a major ingredient in the power of the mass media. Mass media provide a nationwide forum for both individuals and groups and the important aspects of the nation's political and social life that the media choose to cover. People rely on mass media for this information and use it to identify their own interests.

The mass media are powerful guardians of political norms because the American public believes that a free press should keep it informed about the wrongdoings of government. Media images are especially potent when they involve aspects of life that people experience only through the media, rather than directly in their own neighborhoods. The personal and professional lives of politicians, revolutions in distant lands, frenzied trading at stock exchanges, heart transplants, and space shuttle landings are not generally experienced firsthand. Rather, popular perceptions of these activities are shaped largely by the images portrayed in news and fictional stories in print and electronic media. For example, prime time television exaggerates the likelihood of becoming a victim of crime. Heavy viewers, therefore, fear crime more and take more protective measures than do light viewers.<sup>5</sup>

Politically relevant information is often conveyed through stories that are not explicitly concerned with politics. In fact, since most people are exposed far more to nonpolitical information, make-believe media, such as movies and entertainment television, have become major suppliers of political images.<sup>6</sup> Entertainment shows on television, for example, picture social institutions, such as the police or the schools, in ways that convey esteem or heap scorn on them. They also express social judgments about various types of people. For instance, in the past television often depicted African-Americans and women as socially inferior and limited in abilities. This type of coverage conveys messages that audiences may accept at face value, even when they distort real-world conditions. The audience may think that social conditions and judgments shown on television are widely accepted and socially sanctioned and therefore ought to be maintained.

Not only are the media the chief source of nearly every American's views of the world, but they are also the fastest way to disperse information throughout the entire society. News of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and the attempt on the life of President Ronald Reagan spread with incredible speed. In both cases more than 90 percent of the American people heard the news within ninety minutes of the event, either directly from radio or television or secondhand from other people who had received mass media messages.<sup>7</sup>

All of the mass media are politically important because they can reach large audiences. However, their impacts vary, depending on the characteristics of each medium, the nature and quantity of the

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political messages that it carries, and the size of the audience that it reaches. Print media need readers who are literate at appropriate levels. These readers enjoy the luxury of choosing what portion of content they wish to read and to review at will. By contrast, users of electronic media find it difficult to exclude portions of undesired content. Aside from recording and replaying the broadcast, or hearing a repeat broadcast, they cannot review what has been presented. However, many people who cannot enjoy print media because of reading difficulties have adequate listening and viewing skills so that they can extract meaning from broadcasts. That even includes very young children. The intonations available from the spoken word and meanings conveyed by nonverbal sounds, and the visual information in telecasts provide additional information that is largely lacking from printed messages.

One can generalize and say that print media excel in providing factual details and explanations involving abstract ideas. Electronic media, especially television, provide a greater sense of reality, which may explain why some audiences find electronic media more credible than print media.<sup>8</sup> Electronic media also convey physical images, including human body language and facial expressions, much more effectively than print media, and they are especially well suited to engage the viewers' emotions. Furthermore, it is easier for many people to gather insights on events and issues through the electronic media.

The nature of each technology has implications for the political purposes for which it is useful. Television is most likely to feature stories that are visually rich, stressing the pictorial aspects of the story and avoiding stories that deal with abstract concepts. By contrast, print media favor stories that can best be told through an ample number of words. Therefore, many political images transmitted by different types of media vary substantially in substance, manner of presentation, appeal to different audiences, and the political consequences they are likely to generate.

### **Functions of Mass Media**

What major functions do the mass media perform? Three functions mentioned by political scientist Harold Lasswell are (1) surveillance of the world to report ongoing events, (2) interpretation of the meaning of events, and (3) socialization of individuals into their cultural settings.<sup>9</sup> To these three, a fourth function should be added: deliberate manipulation of politics. The manner in which these four functions are performed affects the political fate of individuals, groups, and social organizations, as well as the course of domestic and international politics. Let us look at each function in turn.



## Surveillance

Surveillance involves two major tasks. For the political community at large, “public” surveillance throws the spotlight of publicity on selected people, organizations, and events. This publicity may then make them matters of concern to politicians and to the general public. It may determine which political demands are exposed and which are kept hidden. It also may force politicians to respond to situations on which their views would not otherwise have been aired. For individual citizens in their private capacities, “private” surveillance informs them about current events. While it may lead to political activities, its primary functions are gratification of personal needs and quieting of anxieties. The media, as Marshall McLuhan has observed, are “sense extensions” for individuals who cannot directly witness most of the events of interest to them and their communities.<sup>10</sup>

**Public Surveillance.** Because it arouses civic concerns and stimulates action, public surveillance is politically significant. Newspeople determine what is “news”—which political happenings will be covered and which will be ignored. Their choices affect who and what will have a good chance to become the focus for political discussion and action.<sup>11</sup> Without media attention the people and events covered by the news might have no influence, or reduced influence, on decision makers. Conditions that may be tolerated while these people or events remain obscure may quickly become intolerable in the glare of publicity. This is why politicians, who seek to garner or avoid publicity, time and structure events with media coverage in mind.

The following example illustrates the power of publicity to produce public action. In 1988, the *Chicago Tribune* published the story of Dale Bakker, Jr., a worker in a meat packing plant, whose fingers, wrist, and shoulder were left damaged from the pressures of performing his high speed meat-cutting job. Rather than changing the working conditions that had left the 36-year-old father permanently disabled, company officials suggested that he look for other types of work—even though there was little chance that he could find work given his physical disabilities.

The *Tribune* article accused major meat packing firms of unreasonably raising the production quotas of their workers over the past fifteen years to increase profits. It also charged the Reagan Administration with contributing to dangerous working conditions by slashing the numbers of safety inspectors and thereby weakening the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). The story produced important changes. An industry trade group allotted \$500,000 for research into ways to ease the physical strain on meat packing workers, and the