

TIMOTHY E. COOK

# GOVERNING

WITH



# THE NEWS



THE NEWS MEDIA  
AS A  
POLITICAL  
INSTITUTION

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*The News Media as a  
Political Institution*

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TIMOTHY E. COOK is professor of political science at Williams College.  
He is most recently a coauthor of *Crosstalk: Citizens, Candidates,  
and the Media in a Presidential Campaign*, also published  
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*To the memory of my mother,*

*Audrey J. Cook*

*1913-1972*

*and to the memory of her mother, my Gran,*

*Hilda Jackson*

*1891-1987*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The origin for this book was perhaps fortuitous. Marvin Kalb, director of the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, and Gary Orren met with me in late 1988 and invited me to add to their curriculum by teaching a class to be entitled “The Press and Government.” Having just completed my study of media strategies in the U.S. House of Representatives, it seemed a natural opportunity to extend and develop the thesis I examined there about the increasing connection of media strategies and governing strategies. It turned out—both from preparing for and from teaching the course in the spring of 1990—that there was more potential in this thought than I had anticipated. The Political Communication section of the American Political Science Association was formed shortly thereafter, and, in part to ensure that the panels would not be populated largely by yet more research on elections, I gave a convention paper at the 1990 meetings exploring the possibility of the news media as a political institution situated among other political institutions. Editors expressed interest in my developing this into a book, and before I knew it I had agreed to write one. Several years later, the manuscript is finally finished; I am grateful to many for help along the way.

In one sense, my preparation for the book began much earlier, when, as a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin, I took two classes taught by Murray Edelman: one on organizational theory and practice, the other on political communication. This manuscript builds on putting those literatures together and, in general, owes much to the example of Murray’s inquisitive and interdisciplinary mind. I also owe much to the abiding questions and fruitful methods of my other teachers, most notably the late Barbara Hinckley, Dan Mazmanian, Dick Merelman, Ben Page, Gina Sapiro, and the mentor who influenced me the most, my eighth-grade English and social studies teacher, Harold Golden (wherever he may be).

When I originally set out to write this book, I had thought that I would proceed largely by “soaking and poking” in newsbeats in Washington, but it soon became clear, as I plowed into the literature, that the problem with the field of political communication was not a dearth of information but instead the lack of a larger scheme to make sense of it all. I am indebted to the many fine scholars—whose names will be copiously found in the endnotes—in political science, communication, sociology, history, psychology, anthropology, economics, and beyond; without their research, this book certainly could not have been written.

My year at the Shorenstein Center in 1989–90 provided an ideal incubation for this idea. I learned much from my fellow fellows, particularly through long and thought-provoking conversations with my office mate, Jim Lедerman. The administrators of the center (Marvin Kalb, Gary Orren, and Ellen Hume) helped make the center a welcoming and stimulating place, and I will always be obliged to my good friends on the center staff for going out of their way to help me out. Thanks to all as well who have continued since that time to make the Shorenstein Center an intellectual home for me away from Williams. Most of all, I must thank my students in that Kennedy School class on “The Press and Governing” for their enthusiasm and good humor, their willingness to tolerate as yet unformed arguments, and their thoughts and insights. I also am grateful to my students at Williams, and, in the spring of 1995, at Yale, who have also greatly helped me to develop my ideas.

I have been fortunate to labor in two most collegial subfields of political science (legislative studies and political communication). I benefited from comments on the preliminary versions of some of these chapters as presented at conventions, particularly from Ron Berkman, Kurt Lang, David Mayhew, Bert Rockman, and Pamela Shoemaker. I was also privileged to have a number of gracious telephone conversations with the late Douglass Cater; although we never met face-to-face, his encouragement and thoughts—as well as a continuing belief that “the fourth branch” was worth studying—were invaluable. My once (and I hope, future) co-authors, David Colby and Lyn Ragsdale, generously allowed me to borrow from previous collaborative work. Robert Picard helped to sort through the confusing mass of public policies toward the news. Doug Arnold, Lance Bennett, Doris Graber, Dan Hallin, Susan Herbst, Steve Hess, David Mayhew, Ben Page, Michael Schudson, and Bat Sparrow gave constructive critiques of the penultimate manuscript; I appreciate how each of them pushed me in directions I needed to go, even if I may not have gone as far as they would have liked. At the University of Chicago Press, John Tryneski was a model editor. I benefited from his excel-

lent advice, not to mention his well-calibrated balance of prodding and patience. Many others provided citations, ideas, feedback, encouragement, and the sense that these ideas were worth saying. My thanks to them all.

Much of the writing and research for the book was carried out during a sabbatical from Williams College. Division II grants and a Greenbaum Faculty Fellowship from Williams also funded the exemplary research assistance over two summers of Zachary Cook (who is, by the way, no relation, as far as we can tell).

On the more personal side, none can approach the intellectual engagement, deep convictions, unwavering support, and companionship of Jack Yeager. Jack may not have spirited me off to the Château de la Napoule to begin the book (as he did with my first), but a well-furnished study overlooking York Harbor in Maine, where much of the book was written, and a house in the woods in Eugene, Oregon, where I finished the conclusion, come awfully close. I hope that, with the completion of this project, the adventure of our lives together will be, at least momentarily, less cluttered with stacks of half-written chapters, library books, xeroxed articles, news clippings, and videotapes.

My father died not long after I agreed to write this study. I cannot say what he would have thought of my conclusions, but I am especially sorry he did not live to hold the book in his hands, because I know he would have been pleased to read the dedication.

Timothy E. Cook

March 21, 1997  
Williamstown, Massachusetts

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# 1

## INTRODUCTION: WHY DON'T WE CALL JOURNALISTS POLITICAL ACTORS?

To paraphrase Mark Twain's famous bon mot about the weather, all observers of American politics nowadays talk about the news media's power in government, but nobody does anything about it—or, at least, no one has yet figured out just how to make sense of that power. This is a bit of a puzzle, particularly given that, almost forty years ago, Douglass Cater wrote a slender volume entitled simply *The Fourth Branch of Government*. Here was his theme:

The reporter is the recorder of government but he is also a participant. He operates in a system in which power is divided. He as much as anyone . . . helps to shape the course of government. He is the indispensable broker and middleman among the subgovernments of Washington. . . . He can illumine policy and notably assist in giving it sharpness and clarity; just as easily, he can prematurely expose policy and, as with an undeveloped film, cause its destruction. At his worst, operating with arbitrary and faulty standards, he can be an agent of disorder and confusion. At his best, he can exert a creative influence on Washington politics.<sup>1</sup>

In the essay-writing tradition of another journalist-intellectual, Walter Lippmann, Cater pointed to the news media's power in the American political system. But his true insight was that he saw journalists as playing not only a political but a governmental role. He argued that a separation-of-powers system, where each institution controls significant resources, requires both communication between the branches and the imprimatur of public opinion if anything is to get done.

The news media, said Cater, provide a way to fulfill that task. Getting into the news provides a means to communicate quickly and directly across and within branches in a way otherwise denied to officials. Likewise, public opinion may be called upon to arbitrate between branches but is not readily available except through the surrogate of the news media. But because of the corporate sponsorship of their operations, the

media are at least partially autonomous of the other three branches. With this independence, political actors in the three branches who wish to use the media's power for their own goals must accommodate themselves to the institutional needs of the news media—much as each branch must do when they wish to do the same with one of the other three established constitutional branches. The net effect, Cater warned, is that “government by publicity” may be an increasingly important focus for political actors in Washington who seek to accomplish policy goals, but that gain may be made at a high cost: further implicating journalistic standards of news into political standards of governance.

Cater did not set forth (and did not intend to set forth) a developed theoretical model; instead, his book is a series of discrete essays on a variety of topics related to the interaction of the press and government. Yet his idea deserves close attention as a spur to our attention and imagination. For one, Cater's notions presage, in the years before the dominance of television and before the rise of a media-savvy political class, our contemporary preoccupation with mass-mediated politics.

Most important, although we might quibble with the notion of a “fourth branch,”<sup>2</sup> Cater's sketch of the news media acting as an intermediary institution in Washington provides us with a new and productive way to make sense of the place of journalism in today's American political life. It is particularly beneficial, because for all the bounty of scholarship in political science, sociology, communication, and beyond on the news media and politics, no one has yet come up with an overarching model that would take all this enormously useful work and place it into a larger context that tells us something about the news media's political role. Instead, while there is controversy, confusion, and combat, scholars have tended to speak past each other. Some have proceeded from different definitions of “politics.” Others have chosen case studies that cover only one part of the process of newsmaking or that deal with only certain kinds of news content and then extrapolate incorrectly to statements about the news media and politics.

In particular, our ability to make sense of the political power of the American news media has foundered on difficulties we have encountered in thinking productively of the news media as a “political institution.” Many scholars have pointed to political and governmental roles for reporters and newsmen. But none has set forth, as I will attempt to do, a clear model that sees the news media as a coherent intermediary institution without which the three branches established by the Constitution could not act and could not work. This book seeks to show how the news media are recognizable as a political institution: because of their historical

development, because of shared processes and predictable products across news organizations, and because of the way in which the work of newsmen is so intertwined with the work of official Washington that the news itself performs governmental tasks.

And not only is the news a “coproduction” of the news media and government, but policy today is likewise the result of collaboration and conflict among newsmen, officials, and other political actors. And none of this requires expanding the definition of “politics” past its customary definition in scholarship. Indeed, I will claim that the American news media today are not merely part of politics; they are part of government.

This book will develop, clarify, and refine a new model of the reporter as a key participant in decision making and policy making and of the news media as a central political force in government. It seeks to fill out an empirical theory of the news media as a political institution that will bring together growing literatures: on the internal structures of news organization; on the development of press offices in every branch of government and every level of government; on the relationships of governmental officeholders and journalists inside and outside of the newsbeat system; and on the direct and indirect ways in which official federal policies and practices have, both historically and today, accommodated, regulated, and (above all) subsidized the news.

Given the wealth of information on the public record and the paucity of models that make sense of that evidence, I am more concerned with developing rather than testing an empirical theory of the news media as a political institution. Most of what follows is based on secondary analysis of published studies, with some attention to public speeches and published writings by journalists and political officials—and, of course, the news itself. By returning to this public record, the reader can see if the model makes sense. To the extent that it does, I hope that it will suggest hypotheses for future empirical research.

In that endeavor, I have been inspired by books such as David Mayhew’s instant classic, *Congress: The Electoral Connection*. As every good student of Congress knows, Mayhew suggested that the behavior of members of Congress and its institutional structure could be explained by the single-minded pursuit of reelection. But what is less remembered is that Mayhew did not demonstrate this point as much as he posited it. This book resembles Mayhew’s in its willingness to push the argument to the very limits of its ability to explain. “Perforce it will raise more questions than it answers. As is the custom with monocausal ventures, it will no doubt carry arguments to the point of exaggeration; finally, of

course, I shall be satisfied to explain a significant part of the variance rather than all of it.”<sup>3</sup>

Explanation is one of my goals; evaluation is another. If indeed we can term the news media a “political institution,” then we must begin to ask questions about their structure, function, and responsibilities much as political scientists have already done (exhaustively) for the other three branches. In particular, the ascent of the news media as an unelected intermediary institution raises problems of capacity and accountability.

Stated differently, I pose three questions. Does the growth of the media’s influence in American politics empower an institution that is poorly equipped to assist in governance, given the prominence of journalistic rather than overtly political goals therein? Who elected reporters to represent them in government and politics, and can we think of the news media as politically accountable for the political choices and impacts they have? Does this then mean that perhaps it is time to start thinking about creating a new, more coherent policy regarding the news media to ensure that the news we receive gets us toward the politics and toward the democracy we want?

Now, readers may well protest: But surely, if this is such a good idea, why hasn’t anyone thought of it before? Why didn’t anyone take a cue from Cater in all the time since 1959? The answer is twofold. First, journalists work hard to discourage people from thinking of them as political actors. Indeed, they may be so successful at this attempt that they have convinced even themselves. Second, the study of political communication developed amidst a tradition emphasizing “media effects,” and the disciplines most involved in the study of the politics of the news media have held back from implications of their work. In particular, while political scientists have been quite comfortable referring to the media’s political contribution, they have been less willing to see the news media as an institution; conversely, while sociologists have had little problem referring to the news media as a social institution, they have not been as persuasive in outlining the news media’s political role.

### JOURNALISTS’ SELF-CONCEPTS AND PUBLIC PERSONAS

One reason we don’t think of journalists as political actors is because journalists themselves are reluctant to think of themselves in those terms. In fact, they do quite a bit to discourage that conception—whether in their own minds or those of outside observers such as officials and audiences. This doesn’t mean that journalists harbor personal political biases

that they cleverly mask by going through the motions of objectivity. This is *not* a critique of individual journalists for failing to live up to the norms and standards of their profession. On the contrary: American journalists are faced with an impossible task of gathering all the most important and interesting news under the unremitting pressure of the deadline and with declining resources to do so. Moreover, journalists are conscientiously committed to high standards of impartiality and to excluding their own personal values from the newsmaking process.

But seemingly neutral news values include presumptions about what makes a quality story—most generally, the twin concerns that news should be important and it should be interesting. Neither concern is free from politics. As we shall see later on in this book, important news is most often certified as such by persons “in a position to know” based on their official position within government. Thus, powerful officials are best positioned to create news events, certify issues as newsworthy, and make news on their own terms.

But while such political actors are best able to certify importance, journalists are the final arbiter of what is likely to be interesting. Officials stage media events with particular coverage in mind, but the ultimate news product diverges, in whole or in part, from what they would prefer. Production values—such as drama, novelty, timeliness, vividness, color, easily described stories with two distinct sides, terseness, good visuals, pithy sound bites—often dictate the angle of the story or the “play” given it. Likewise, certain accounts are esteemed as quality stories, particularly when they follow the “enduring values” that the sociologist Herbert Gans identified in the news of the early seventies and that we still see in today’s news: stories of rugged individuals fighting faceless bureaucracies, of threats to small-town Americana, of selfless leaders taking charge in government or business, and, above all, of the return of normal order after its natural or unnatural interruption. So much news is highly formulaic that it has been labeled “novelty without change.”<sup>4</sup> The repetitive quality of the news generally offers access only to certain storylines—and to those political actors who anticipate the recurring preferences of the news media.

It is not in spite of, but because of, their commitment to norms of objectivity and impartiality that journalists are nowadays important political actors. By following standard routines of newsmaking, journalists end up hiding their influence not only from outside actors but also from themselves. In particular, they follow what the sociologist Gaye Tuchman aptly termed “objectivity as strategic ritual.”<sup>5</sup> The notion of objectivity continues to have a powerful pull on journalists. Thus, disagreement over

\*opposite of Bennett!

the ethical demands of their profession rarely produces conflict over the idea that, at base, they should and can be neutral observers of politics. A striking example arose in 1995 when the National Association of Black Journalists debated whether or not to pass a resolution asking for a new trial for Mumia Abu-Jamal, an African-American journalist sentenced to death for murdering a police officer in Philadelphia.<sup>6</sup> Journalists on both sides of the resolution noted their adherence to objectivity. A *Washington Post* reporter arguing against the resolution said, "If we get involved in calling for a new trial, that would threaten the integrity of the organization. I don't want to step out of ourselves and become part of the story." His statement was reinforced by a *Newsday* columnist, who said, "We are journalists, not activists and not lawyers." But those who spoke for the resolution advocated objectivity as well. A *New York Times* reporter contended that Abu-Jamal "was a journalist just like us. He tried to produce stories that made him infamous to a lot of people including those in law enforcement. To suggest that he get a new trial does not say he is guilty or innocent."<sup>7</sup>

Journalists, by adhering to the strategic ritual of objectivity, can persuade their readers and themselves that their report is as neutral as it can be. Reports present conflicting possibilities but rarely go beyond "both sides of the story." Narrowing a complex situation down to two and only two sides, however, already defines the politics and power that is likely to follow. Colorful judgments are usually found in quotes, not in the journalist's own language, even if reporters have sought out particular sources with the hope that they will say exactly what the reporters expect them to say. Passive voices abound ("It was learned today that . . ."), inanimate objects and concepts come to life ("Questions continued to dog President Clinton . . ."), and first-person pronouns are frowned upon ("When Mr. Gorbachev greeted a visitor today . . ."), as if journalists' presences, let alone their queries, had not affected what was learned and asked.

In short, the final news product gives little sense of the individual choices that reporters work hard to protect in their work; instead, reporters try to call attention to the skill and craft with which they interpret the inevitable facts of the outside world. The rise of news analysis and punditry, on one hand, or the palpable physical presence of television reporters, on the other hand, may mean that journalists are less able to obscure their individual power.<sup>8</sup> Yet all news in any medium undergoes strategic rituals. It is legitimated by quotes from official authoritative sources to provide the raw material of their stories. The separation of editorials and "news analysis" on one hand from straight news on the

other suggests that only the former is subjective. And as Tuchman has noted, the camera framing of television journalists is a visual translation of the strategic ritual of objectivity, shot in "close social distance," which allows for discussion without intimacy. At its most famous—the *60 Minutes* exposé—the investigating journalist is shot at a respectful distance while the face of the person who is being grilled fills the screen with the emotion and power of an extreme close-up shot.<sup>9</sup> Not just the language of news in print but the implications of television framing are clear: journalists present themselves as coolly dispassionate in contrast to the intensity, color, and subjectivity of their subjects.

The daily strategic ritual can and does break down. Journalists sometimes are missing from the scene of a newsworthy occurrence (for instance, the assassination of President Kennedy, captured only by amateur photographers), thereby raising doubts about professional competence.<sup>10</sup> At other times, they inadvertently reveal that news would not have happened without their direct involvement; rather than merely channeling or reflecting it, they are perceived thereby to have interfered in politics and come in for criticism for their choices. But on occasions when one strategic ritual breaks down, another—"repair work"—goes into play.<sup>11</sup> Sometimes, internal investigations proceed; at other times, ombudsmen and media critics examine the evidence. But, almost inevitably, these failed stories become opportunities for the news media to reinforce the strategic ritual, by pointing the finger away from the standard methods of journalism that often contributed to the story and toward individual infractors, whether flawed journalists or devious sources. When the media themselves become newsworthy, the resultant soul-searching rarely restricts the power of journalists or the strategic rituals that help make it possible.

In short, journalists work hard to maximize their autonomy. But they also work hard to present a news account that seems largely beyond their individual control. This is not to doubt the many restrictions under which journalists work; indeed, I will describe a number of them later in this book. Yet these cannot justify protestations of journalists that they exercise little discretion and therefore have no political power in their own right.

But journalists' skillful elision of their power is not the only reason for scholarly inattention. We must note also how the disciplines most actively involved in the study of the news media's politics—particularly political science, sociology, and communication—developed so as to reinforce the journalists' self-concepts and public personas, and so as to occlude the possibility of the news media as a political institution.

## THE ROADS NOT TAKEN

Let us begin with political science, which has been quite confused about whether, and to what extent, the news media are a political institution. Here are some quotes from distinguished political scientists who are among the leading scholars of the news media. Stephen Hess, senior scholar at the Brookings Institution, is best known for his *Newswork* series of insightful books about the Washington press corps that suggests we may have overestimated their influence. But Hess has had no problem in referring to the Washington press corps as “another public policy institution” to which he turned after studying the presidency.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, Thomas Patterson, Bradlee Professor of Government and the Press at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, has written landmark works that charge that the news media are overly powerful in American politics. Yet in Patterson’s two best-known studies of the media’s role in American elections, he notes, “The campaign is chaotic largely because the press is not a political institution and has no capacity for organizing the election in a coherent manner.”<sup>13</sup> Even political scientists who owe much to the sibling disciplines of sociology and communication are ambivalent. Thus, Daniel Hallin, a political scientist now in the communication department at the University of California at San Diego, wrote in an important essay about the potential contributions of critical theory in sociology to our understanding of the news: “The mass media are an institution with a dual social identity. They are both an economic (or, in Western Europe, often political) and a cultural institution; they are a profit-making business and at the same time a producer of meaning, a creator of social consciousness.”<sup>14</sup>

This presents a quandary. Why is it that one author who doubts the media’s power does see them as a political institution, while the reverse is true of other scholars warning about the media’s role in politics? Is it important that Hess refers to a “public policy institution” rather than a “political institution”? Do Patterson and Hallin imply that nothing can be a political institution unless it has been explicitly “instituted” to pursue political aims?

It is hard to know the answers to any of these questions, given that none of these authors develop or even justify their rather bare evocation of the news media as being institutional or not. Numerous political scientists have pointed to the potential power of the news media, but from that it is equally tough to know whether this power is exercised by journalists, by officials (and other sources who have easy access to the news), or by some combination thereof.<sup>15</sup>



Sociologists—and communication scholars heavily influenced by the sociological tradition—have had less difficulty pointing to the news media as an institution. For instance, whether we refer to the Weberian tradition found in the writings of C. Wright Mills, or the lineages of neo-Marxist critical theory and cultural studies, sociologists have aptly depicted the news media as a social institution, perhaps a pivotal social institution.<sup>16</sup> Yet these scholarly insights break down in turn on partial or unconvincing or incomplete understandings of politics. Mills and critical theorists such as Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse all saw the rise of the “culture industry” as creating a “mass society” that made it less possible for individuals to resist the messages thereby diffused.<sup>17</sup> Yet this key assumption has been greatly eroded by research that concludes that the audience can and does make unique individual sense of media content—which in turn raises questions about the political impact of “the culture industry.”

Those sociologists who moved into cultural studies likewise pointed to the institutional aspects of the news media, operating to reinforce an ideological hegemony that constricted the range of possible political outcomes and emphasized a “common sense” approach to political problems that reinforced the status quo. In its subtlest version, best articulated by Stuart Hall and Todd Gitlin, scholarship provided evidence that “media institutions were both, in fact, free of direct compulsion and constraint, and yet freely articulated themselves systematically around definitions of the situations which favoured the hegemony of the powerful.”<sup>18</sup> Yet such studies looked at only a limited albeit important sample of political news, usually those dealing with social movements, the definition of “deviance,” crime, international security, and foreign policy. It is telling that students of hegemony have rarely taken their inquiries into domains of mainstream domestic politics. In other words, while these authors may well be right that “one ‘function’ of the media [is] reproducing dominant conceptions of the political world,” they bypass “other possible functions such as giving information for elites to make decisions or serving as a forum for debate among elites.”<sup>19</sup>

But not only has there been confusion about the news media’s politics and their institutional dimension. The disciplines of political science and mass communication have been under the sway of what one recent book terms “the voter persuasion paradigm.”<sup>20</sup> The standard focus in media studies on elections does provide a key entry point. But they do not and cannot tell us much about politics and government outside the electoral context. Studies of voting tend implicitly to favor a model going from political sources through the media to the public which responds, thereby