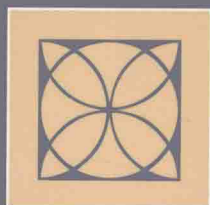


*The*  
PRESS  
*and*  
AMERICAN  
POLITICS  
The New Mediator

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*Second Edition*



RICHARD DAVIS

# THE PRESS AND AMERICAN POLITICS

The New Mediator

*Second Edition*

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PRENTICE HALL, Upper Saddle River, New Jersey 07458

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Davis, Richard, (date)

The press and American politics: the new mediator/Richard Davis.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-13-185943-9

1. Press and politics—United States. 2. Mass media—Political aspects—United States. 3. United States—Politics and government—1989— I. Title. PN4888.P6D37 1995

071'.3—dc20

95-16059

CIP

Acquisitions Editor: Mike Bickerstaff

Editor in Chief: Nancy Roberts

Editorial Director: Charlyce Jones Owen

Production Editor: Tony VenGraitis

Buyer: Robert Anderson

Editorial Assistant: Anita Castro



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Simon & Schuster / A Viacom Company

Upper Saddle River, New Jersey 07458

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Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 0-13-185943-9

Prentice-Hall International (UK) Limited, *London*

Prentice-Hall of Australia Pty. Limited, *Sydney*

Prentice-Hall Canada Inc., *Toronto*

Prentice-Hall Hispanoamericana, S.A., *Mexico*

Prentice-Hall of India Private Limited, *New Delhi*

Prentice-Hall of Japan, Inc., *Tokyo*

Simon & Schuster Asia Pte. Ltd., *Singapore*

Editora Prentice-Hall do Brasil, Ltda., *Rio de Janeiro*

THE PRESS  
AND  
AMERICAN POLITICS

*To my wife, Molina*

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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# PREFACE

Since the first edition of *The Press and American Politics* was published four years ago, the field of political communication has been dynamic. The role of new media—talk radio, television talk, and entertainment programming—has altered not only how presidential candidates campaign but also the vehicles for political debate. The 1992 presidential campaign saw the rise of an independent presidential candidate who campaigned primarily via television. A presidential administration inaugurated in 1993 has warred with the press for most of its tenure.

The book's original thesis—the news media have become new mediators in American politics and they enjoy greater autonomy today than ever before—has been re-confirmed in the past four years. Since 1991, this autonomy has not been diminished. However, the news media's role as intermediary does not assume enormous power over Americans' attitudes and opinions. It also does not mean that the news media are intent on imposing a partisan or ideological bias, or conversely, that the news media are merely tools in the hands of manipulative public officials. These assumptions permeate much of what is written about the press.

In this second edition, these assumptions are addressed and discarded in favor of a more complex role for the news media as a new mediator struggling with other traditional mediators such as political parties, political elites, and interest groups in the processes of American politics. The object of our attention will be interaction rather than expected dominance or subservience. The following questions are typical of the ones answered in this book: What is the relationship of the news media with political institutions and process? How has the process evolved historically? How do reporters interact with policymakers in the making of news about public policy? How has communications technology shaped that interaction?

The second edition has several significant additions, including supplementary chapters. One new chapter profiles the news media today. Another new chapter discusses the media's coverage of the bureaucracy and how agencies make news. Still another focuses on how interest groups interact with the news media.

The first edition's chapter on media effects on the mass public has been divided into two chapters—one focusing on how the audience interacts with the media, and the other on media effects on political attitudes and behavior. The chapter on campaigns similarly has been divided. One chapter describes the roles the media play in presidential campaigns, while the other analyzes how candidates use the media for campaigning. Particular emphasis is placed on the role of the new media, mentioned above, during the 1992 campaign.

This book is organized to facilitate a student's understanding of the dynamic and multifaceted nature of this interaction. Six sections move the reader from the context of the media's role through a discussion of news-shaping, effects on the mass public, the electoral functions and effects of the news media, the interaction with political institutions and organizations, and the media's policymaking role.

The first chapter analyzes the communication revolution that has enhanced media role in American politics. It includes a review of the technological changes such as cable, satellites, and computer networks that have impacted American politics.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 narrate the historical development of the news media's political role in the United States. From the colonial period to the rise of broadcasting in the twentieth century, the changes shaping both the political and media systems are documented.

Chapter 5 contrasts the U.S. media with those of other nations—liberal democracies, emerging democracies, and authoritarian regimes.

The next chapter completes the context section by explaining the government regulatory function over the news media and how it has affected broadcast and print differently.

Chapters 7, 8, and 9 explain who the American news media are, what the process of newgathering is like, and how that process is affected by individuals, institutions, and organizations who attempt to manage the news.

Chapters 10 and 11 are the chapters addressing the question of media effects on the mass public. The first of these chapters describes an interactive audience using the news media more than being abused by it. Chapter 11 discusses the effects of the news media on political attitudes and behavior.

The next two chapters relate how the news media perform significant roles in the conduct of campaigns and how presidential candidates have adjusted their campaigning styles to the presence of the media. Special emphasis is placed on the 1992 presidential campaign.

Interaction between the news media and political institutions and organizations is the subject for the next five chapters. The relationship of the media with the presidency, Congress, the Supreme Court, the bureaucracy, and interest groups is described in each of the respective chapters with frequent comparative references across institutions.

The media's policymaking role is described in Chapters 19, 20, and 21. The first of this trio of chapters relates the role of the news media in the policymaking process, with particular attention to domestic public policy. The following two chapters address news coverage of U.S. foreign and defense policy respectively. News coverage of U.S. military involvement in recent regional crises—the Persian Gulf War, Somalia, and Bosnia—is featured.

The conclusion discusses the future of news media role in American democracy and analyzes proposed reforms in both the media and the political systems.

Any book is the product of the combined effort of many people whose names never appear in print. I do not even know the names of the typesetters, production personnel, marketing staff, warehouse clerks, and sales representatives who cooperate in the production and sale of a book. Nevertheless I thank them for their work in making this book a reality.

A few I do know should be acknowledged by name. My department chair, David B. Magleby, has been a constant source of encouragement and support. Thomas E. Patterson, my friend and mentor, gave much-needed direction and support for his former pupil. Thanks also to those who reviewed the manuscript at various points and provided useful suggestions for improvement.

My research assistants—Vincent James Strickler, Brady Long, Angela Hermann, Marc Turman, and Amber McElwain—have provided invaluable help in completing this book.

I wish to acknowledge the support of Charlyce Jones Owen, Mike Bickerstaff, and Tony VenGraitis, all at Prentice Hall.

Last but not least, words cannot describe my feelings for my family who have supported me through this inexplicable passion to write. Thank you so very much.



# INTRODUCTION

## Assumptions about Media Power

*"The press has substantial, and specific, impact on policies and policymaking in the federal government."*<sup>1</sup>

*"The images on the nightly news count for everything in a presidential election campaign and beyond . . . [I]n this culture, if something is not on the TV nightly news, it didn't happen, it doesn't exist."*<sup>2</sup>

The political power of the press. Today the subject is on the minds and tongues of politicians, political pundits, presidents, and everyday people. Academics debate it at conferences, roundtables, and in classrooms, and journalists discuss their own power in opinion columns, television documentaries, and even news stories. The press is taken to task for making and then breaking presidential candidates, for glorifying and then condemning individual politicians, for unduly publicizing the activities of terrorists and criminals but failing to address the pressing social issues of the day. How broadly does the press actually influence the electoral process? Do the news media set national policy by ignoring or highlighting certain issues, or pursuing agendas of their own?

The role of the press in American politics has become a major source of discussion and controversy in recent years. Why is the subject such a popular one? Do the news media, in fact, possess the kinds of power that are attributed to them? When and how were such powers—or the perceptions of such powers—acquired? And, most importantly, how does this perceived power influence the democratic political system in this country—both the electoral process, and the policy-making process?

We need to be clear at the outset about what we mean when we use the words *press* and *news media*. In this book, I use the two terms interchangeably to refer both to those organizations that are in the business of gathering and disseminating news, and to the reporters, editors, and other individuals who are professional newsgatherers and disseminators, primarily at the national level. In other words, the terms *press* and *news media* differentiate the *news* function from the *entertainment* function

of the mass media. Although the politics of entertainment and the entertainment of politics are both valid topics for discussion, they are not ours.

Similarly, I use the word *government* to refer to the formal apparatus of United States governance, including its institutions, elected leaders, and agencies. I use the term *political system* to refer to those processes that operate to enable the explicit government of the United States to govern—parties, the electoral system, and so on. Although a number of other players clearly influence how the country functions—lobbyists, special interest groups, corporations and private agencies, among others—they are not our concern here.

## A PERVASIVE NEWS MEDIA

Indisputably, the media are more pervasive today than they were just thirty years ago. The expanded availability and usage of mass media are facts—perhaps phenomena—of American life. Television, which spread rapidly across the nation during the 1950s, is the primary example, but the print media have also fared well. Over 9,000 newspapers and 12,000 periodicals are published in the United States on a regular basis. Daily newspaper circulation tops 63 million copies—one for every four Americans—and has remained more or less stable since 1970. Weekly newspaper circulation tops 53 million.<sup>3</sup> National newsmagazines such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World Report* attract a combined circulation of nearly 10 million, and several nationally circulated newspapers sell in excess of a million copies each weekday—the *Wall Street Journal* (2 million), *USA Today* (1.4 million), the *Los Angeles Times* (1.2 million) and the *New York Times* (1 million). In the past twenty years, circulation for the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* has grown by 25 percent, and circulation for the *Wall Street Journal* has nearly doubled. Size as well as circulation has increased; between 1950 and 1980, the length of the average newspaper grew from 34 to 60 pages.<sup>4</sup>

Of all the potential media for news, radio is undoubtedly the most pervasive. In 1952, some 3,000 commercial radio stations were licensed in the United States; today, there are more than 10,500. In 1950, about 40 million households had radio receivers. Today, 99 percent of all American households and 95 percent of all cars have radios; and 57 percent of adult American workers have a radio at work. The cumulative weekly audience for radio in the United States is 183 million—about 95 percent of the U.S. population. More than 90 percent of all Americans over the age of 18 say they listen to the radio either daily or every weekday.<sup>5</sup>

Despite radio's massive potential audience, however, it is television that Americans perceive as the most influential medium in their lives. In 1950, 98 television stations operated in the United States, and only about nine percent of American households owned television sets. Today more than 1,000 broadcast television stations hold U.S. licenses. Ninety-eight percent of all American households own at least one set, and more than half own two sets. Once limited to the living room, the TV has now moved into the bedroom, the kitchen, the dining room, and even the bathroom.<sup>6</sup>

Even more remarkable than television's omnipresence is the intensity of our viewing habits. Most Americans say that watching television is their preferred

evening activity—outranking reading, or even spending time with the family. Recent additions to television technology—cable and satellite transmissions, VCRs—have affected viewing habits since the 1980s, and network viewership has declined in the last decade. But there is no arguing that television in one form or another occupies a major place in American life.<sup>7</sup>

Americans perceive television primarily as an entertainment medium.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, about half of all Americans say they watch television news—more often local news programs than national network news. A variety of new broadcast options arrived on the scene in the 1980s, including Cable News Network (CNN), which broadcasts news 24 hours a day and is available in hotels throughout much of the world; supplementary hard-news shows such as “Nightline;” C-SPAN, which broadcasts from the floor of Congress; a proliferation of magazine news shows such as “20/20” (modeled more or less on the longtime hit “60 Minutes”); and “docudrama” shows such as “A Current Affair” and “Inside Edition.” “News junkies” may watch less network news than they once did, but new options assure that they can now watch some form of televised news around the clock.

### **Public Reliance on the Media**

Americans claim that they rely on television more than any other medium for public affairs information. One survey suggests that 66 percent of the American public use television as their main source of news,<sup>9</sup> up from less than 20 percent in 1960.<sup>10</sup> The number who say that they depend on more than one media source for news has dwindled steadily.<sup>11</sup> For political information in particular, Americans tend to turn to television. An estimated 90 million people watched the third presidential debate in 1992.<sup>12</sup> Americans not only rely on television and other media for information, they give such media high marks for credibility. Between 70 and 80 percent of Americans say they feel the press is generally believable; predictably, particular praise is aimed at the *Wall Street Journal*, CNN, and ABC News anchor Peter Jennings.<sup>13</sup> Television is viewed as more credible than print, due to the visual nature of the medium.<sup>14</sup> In fact, one recent survey suggests that most Americans rate Tom Brokaw, Peter Jennings, and Dan Rather as being more believable than President Clinton or Ross Perot.<sup>15</sup>

Further, Americans perceive the media as being quite powerful in influencing what people think about and what national policy issues are addressed. For example, Americans believe that the media have more power over the public agenda than any other institution, including national political leaders, business, and Hollywood.<sup>16</sup>

### **Political Reliance on the News Media**

If the governed rely on the news media as a credible and accessible source of information, those who govern also depend on the press, both in electoral politics and in the process of governance. The number of journalists in Washington alone has

tripled since the end of World War II to more than 10,000; and the number of reporters accredited by the congressional press galleries grew from 1,300 in 1957 to almost 5,000 in the early 1980s.<sup>17</sup> The White House provides credentials for some 1,500 journalists, three times the number in 1960 (although only about 100 cover the White House full time); and when the president travels, some 100 reporters typically accompany him.

The political press corps is not only larger, it is more visible than it once was. CBS reporter Dan Rather acquired a national reputation—and ultimately the anchorman's chair—through his high-profile adversarial behavior as a White House correspondent, and ABC's Sam Donaldson used the same platform to enhance his own visibility. One 1985 survey demonstrated that more Americans could recognize a picture of ABC journalist Barbara Walters than could identify then Vice President George Bush or Democratic vice presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro.<sup>18</sup>

In part because of its vastly increased size and visibility, as well as because of the extent to which the public relies on it, the press demands more time and attention from politicians and public officials than it once did. Presidential candidates in particular find they must develop new skills and strategies in response to that. A press secretary for one candidate in the 1988 campaign estimated that his candidate spent more than one-third of each day in direct contact with the press. "It's not just news conferences, but one-on-one interviews, hotel room briefings, radio and TV shows, editorial board discussions, back-of-the-car interviews and conversations," he explained.<sup>19</sup> More and more, candidates assume that such efforts are necessary to gain the attention of the press, to enhance their public recognition and favorable image, and finally to acquire public support.

Once elected, public officials, including presidents, continue to devote large blocks of time to "handling" the press. Former presidential aide John Ehrlichman recounted how President Nixon "used to sit around figuring out how he could get a minute and a half on the evening news"<sup>20</sup> and Ronald Reagan, who gave fewer formal press conferences than any previous president since Franklin Roosevelt, was a recognized master of the "photo opportunity." Some 3,000 public information specialists work in federal government agencies, and virtually all members of Congress today employ public relations aides. The congressional press galleries are staffed by Congress to facilitate press coverage, and the Senate issues some 30 to 50 gallery passes daily.<sup>21</sup> Elected officials devote this kind of time, money, and energy to press relations only because they believe that such efforts will pay off in terms of reelection or support for their policy-making initiatives.

## THE IMPACT OF NEWS MEDIA ON AMERICAN POLITICS

What does this dramatic increase in the size and visibility of the political press in this country—and the concomitant rise in dependency on it by both governed and governors—mean to the way the political process operates? The increase in and of itself is of little concern to political scientists. What we want to know is whether—and

how—that increase impacts on the processes, institutions, and individuals of American politics.

A fundamental tension exists today between the American news media and American politics, traceable to two developments in recent American political history. The first is the change outlined above—the increased reliance of both citizenry and government on the press as a primary “communications bridge” or linking mechanism. The second, equally important development is the increasingly divergent imperatives of press and politicians, which have moved the press itself into a more and more autonomous position, out from under traditional political controls.

### **The News Media’s Role as a Linking Mechanism**

In recent years, the American political process has grown dependent on the press in ways that have not traditionally been typical. Political actors and institutions rely on the news media to disseminate information to the public and to garner support; and the public relies on the news media to provide information about how political processes and institutions work, act, and are constituted. What factors have brought about this increased reliance on the press from both producers and consumers?

***Changes in Mass Media.*** Vast technological advances have occurred in the last 40 years in the communications industry. New technology in mass communications has broadened the reach and speed of news transmissions beyond anything imaginable just three or four decades ago. The new technologies include innovations in print, in radio and television broadcasting, and in the widespread use of satellite transmissions. The reach of both broadcast and print media today dwarfs that of communications mechanisms of the past.

In addition to enhanced speed and reach, as we have noted above, the news media, particularly television, can boast high levels of credibility. The press’s ability to provide live visual coverage of events half a world away, the role that the press played in uncovering the Watergate scandal, and the increasingly personalized nature of television journalism, among other developments, have contributed to the public’s perception that the news is basically “true.” This perception in turn increases our tendency to rely on the press for the information on which we base our opinions—and our votes.

***Changes in American Politics.*** The press’s role as a linking mechanism between public and government has also been enhanced by various developments in American politics, including the weakening and decentralization of the major political parties, the increasing significance of the national government, and the rise of the modern presidency.

During the past two decades, political parties have undergone extensive reforms which have affected their ability to influence elections and to operate as centralized political organizations. Party rules encouraging primaries, instituted after the tumultuous presidential nominating conventions of 1968, have robbed

party leaders of their traditional control over the presidential nominating process and led to the nomination of “outsiders” like Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and Bill Clinton. In addition, new campaign finance laws limit the amount of direct funding that a party can provide to its own nominees, once again removing control from the hands of party leaders. And finally, voters have become less loyal to particular parties than were their parents and grandparents, and more likely to split their tickets and vote for candidates of different parties for different offices.<sup>22</sup> As a result of all these changes, political leaders can no longer count on the infrastructures of their political parties to disseminate information and provide a basis for support.

Changes in the presidential selection process over the last twenty years have produced candidates who rely less on—and therefore owe less to—the centralized structures of their own parties. Instead, candidates find themselves turning to the capabilities of the news media to make their case as they set out to win nomination or election. In 1976, Jimmy Carter’s self-conscious stance as a Washington outsider brought considerable media attention in the wake of the “insider” Watergate scandal; despite the Democratic party’s initial lack of interest in his candidacy, national press attention made an otherwise obscure Georgia governor a national figure. Although supported by broad segments of the Democratic party, Michael Dukakis turned heavily to the media rather than to the party to transform him from a regional candidate into a front runner. The reduced role that political parties now play in the presidential nomination process means that candidates must look elsewhere for mechanisms to reach the public, and the news media, already in place and eager for material, provide the most effective and viable alternative.

During the same period that the influence of political parties has declined, the significance of the national government in American political life has sharply increased. The national government’s ability to make policy that affects individual citizens, from the Supreme Court’s *Roe v. Wade* decision supporting legalized abortions to the congressional “rescue” of private corporations like Chrysler, has increased the public’s need for an information conduit or linking mechanism that is national in scope. The kind of interpersonal and small group communication that was traditionally possible at the local and state levels is simply unachievable for citizens who want to interact with an immense and distant national government. As the locus of power has shifted over the last thirty years to the national level, the mass media, capable of reaching a national audience and doing it quickly, has emerged as a fitting intermediary.

The presidency in particular has changed in recent years. As power has centralized in the Oval Office, and attention has focused there, the office of the president has gradually “decoupled” from the political parties; today’s presidency relies very little on political parties to communicate its messages and needs. Presidents typically attempt to set public agendas and produce major changes in a few select policy areas. To accomplish these objectives, they require a mechanism that allows them to influence public opinion and to win legislative support for their policy initiatives. Here again, the media serve their purposes.

All these changes—new technology and enhanced credibility for the media, decreasing power of political parties, and enhanced role of national government and particularly of the presidency—have contributed to the rise of the press as the primary linking mechanism between government (or political leaders and political institutions) and the American public. Certainly the imperatives under which the press operates have made the press more aggressive in accepting this role. Indeed, the press has, wittingly or unwittingly, contributed to the changes in political structure by advocating changes in the presidential selection process and nationalizing heretofore local issues by placing them squarely on the doorstep of the White House. The actions of the news media in this area often reflect internal economic or political imperatives, and the increasing independence of the political press.

### **The Increasing Autonomy of the Press**

Although the institutions and leaders of the American political system have grown increasingly dependent on the news media, the press itself has emerged as a more and more autonomous force, driven by its own needs and imperatives. Press dependency on political leaders, once a major factor in political communications in this country, has decreased almost to insignificance over the course of the last century.

In the early days of the republic, the American press was typically financially dependent on the resources of political leaders who provided patronage to editors and publishers, start-up loans for newspapers, and continued funds for operation—as well as, often, guaranteed readerships and news material itself. John Fenno relied on Alexander Hamilton's largesse in the form of printing contracts for the funds to publish a newspaper advocating Hamilton's views, and special designations—newspapers published “by authority” of a local government, for example—were common.

Although news organizations today clearly continue to depend on cooperation from government news sources and a “partnership” that we will examine more closely in later chapters, the press no longer depends on the government or individual political leaders for economic stability. Such stability results from a concentration on commercial interests rather than political considerations. News media are funded by subscriptions and/or advertising; they rely primarily on competition in the marketplace, and not political ideology, for their success.

In addition, news media professionals (editors, publishers, reporters, producers) possess far greater control over their “product” than did their counterparts of the nineteenth century. Editors of partisan journals in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were often accountable to political leaders for the content of their newspapers. Although editor-publishers could and often did resist the pressure applied by such leaders, the likely result of that resistance was the loss of their newspaper's special status with the administration, and the resulting loss of readership and financial support which such status provided. Articles submitted by political leaders who supported the paper were rarely rejected, edited, or balanced



with an opposing viewpoint; typically they were printed in full without critical commentary.

Reporters and other professionals now play a much more active role in determining what messages will be transmitted through the media. Decisions about assignments, selection of stories, editing, and time and space allotments are made by the news organizations themselves. Obviously such decisions often reflect the efforts of public relations lobbyists and the availability of material—forms of agenda setting engaged in by those who “make” news—but only rarely, as in the case of an issue affecting national security, does the press respond to direct intervention from government leaders or institutions. The press of today tends to synthesize and analyze rather than simply repeat what it’s told, as it did 200 years ago. The fact that politicians seek influence with the press testifies to the very different role of the press in the political process today.

Because news professionals rather than political leaders control the news product, the press today largely shapes our definition of what is news. Political leaders, for the most part, accept that definition. News is what the journalists say it is. Photo opportunities, ceremonial bill-signings, summits which execute no substantial business, and other *pseudo events*, as political scientist Daniel Boorstin calls them,<sup>23</sup> represent attempts by political leaders to meet needs that are defined for the most part by the news media.

Political leaders in the early years of this country’s history actively defined what constituted news. Their definition included texts of speeches and documents, transcripts of legislative proceedings, and articles written by or for politicians. Journalistic definitions of the news occasionally prevailed, but particularly in the political sphere, what got printed more frequently represented a product defined exclusively by political leaders. The influence of government on news certainly continues to exist, as we shall see more clearly in Part V of this book. But that influence is more subtle than it once was, and the press is increasingly independent of it.

### **Competing Imperatives**

The increasing reliance of the political system on the press as a linking mechanism with the public, and the increasing autonomy of the news media, have inevitably created a struggle for control. If the press still depended on political leaders or government authority for funding and readership, the question of control over the news would be irrelevant; the political system’s imperative would prevail. Similarly, if the political system did not depend on the press as an intermediary between itself and the citizenry, there would be no tension.

The fact is, however, that the press does shoulder the primary burden of linking public and government at this point in American political history. As a result, political leaders and agencies often pressure the news media to fulfill that function in specific ways—and those pressures often conflict with the press’s own imperatives as an independent, autonomous institution.



**Political Imperatives.** The political institutions and leaders in a democracy need to be able to communicate efficiently with the citizenry. The mechanism that links the government with the public should ideally provide not only a conduit for communication, but also a conduit for the organization of opinion. That such a linking mechanism must exist is not a matter of debate, but the appropriate nature of such a mechanism and the roles that its various participants should play is.

A democratic government needs the capability not only to communicate its own policies and decisions to the people, but also to gather and organize the responses and needs of those people in order to make appropriate policy decisions. In the context of elections, the system needs a mechanism capable of presenting candidates and the public debate on the issues. In a non-electoral context, the political system needs a mechanism capable of disseminating information and of gathering and shaping public views for policy-makers. In other words, whatever the conduit is that bridges the distance between governed and governors, it must be capable both of expressing the views of the governors and of articulating competently the public response to those views. The imperatives of the political leaders, then, require that the linking mechanism perform certain functions that enable the democracy to run more effectively.

Obviously, political leaders also have other imperatives that are often implicit in their criticisms of the press. Both leaders and institutions want the news media to report favorably on their actions and decisions; and both, to maintain their policy-making positions, want an accurate reading of the public response to those actions and decisions.

**Press Imperatives.** The press has its own set of imperatives, however. The news media are governed, first and foremost, by financial concerns, and their continued operation is contingent upon financial success. This preoccupation with commercial stability is manifested through the drive for audience or circulation and the competition for advertising revenues. The American press operates within a vastly competitive environment.

In addition to the need for commercial or financial stability, the press is governed by its own need for journalistic independence. From before the turn of this century onward, journalists have insisted on the virtue of their independence, and have emphasized the standard of objectivity as their primary credo. The news media have proudly functioned as a “common carrier”—an objective reporter of information. During the past thirty years, however, and particularly since the press’s role in the Watergate scandal in the 1970s, journalists have placed a heightened emphasis on the news media’s role as “watchdog” over government, as a trustee of the public good, and as a critic of the government.

The imperatives of press and political system are predictably dissimilar. The relationship is not always adversarial, of course. At many points, the interests of press and government intersect, and cooperation—explicit or implicit—is the order of the day. But as long as the political system seeks to use the press to link the governors and the governed for the continued functioning of democratic government,