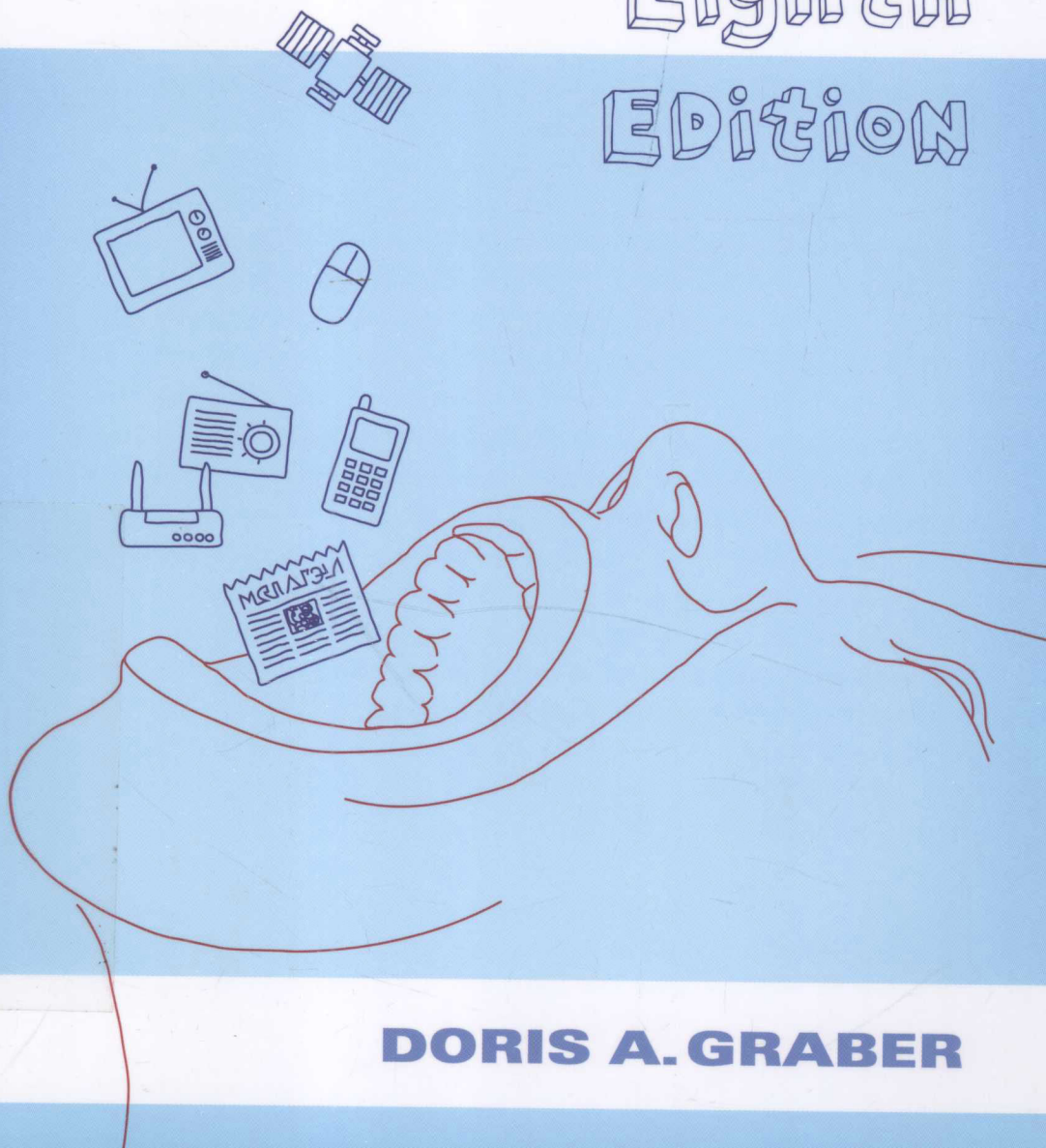


# MASS MEDIA AND AMERICAN POLITICS

EIGHTH  
EDITION



**DORIS A. GRABER**

E I G H T H E D I T I O N

# **Mass Media and American Politics**

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University of Illinois at Chicago



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*To*  
*Tom, Susan, Lee, Jim, and Jack*  
*—my very special students*

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**N**ews media are crucial in a democratic society because citizens need information about ongoing problems and policies. What happens to public life if established news-gathering institutions contract sharply because their main sources of income and their audiences are shriveling? What difference does it make if these debilitating shrinkages are mostly due to the explosive growth of new news channels? These are important questions at a time when established media institutions are wrestling with the challenges created by the Internet. The new technologies that are changing the news media scene require reinventing the media world. That reinvention was unfolding when this book went to press in summer 2009.

The reinvention represents a marriage of old and new technologies, fueled by mutual respect and tolerance for a great deal of diversity. As in previous periods of rapid technological change, the established media are surviving in familiar formats or in hybrid shapes, such as Web versions of traditional offerings. However, legacy media are hampered by radically reduced resources, and their control over news content is sharply diminished. The “new media” upstarts are filling some of the empty turf but largely rely on legacy media professionals for deciding what becomes news and then to gather and report it. The new media primarily provide commentary about the reported happenings. Most notably, much discussion on the Web is interactive, and Web-based communities of like-minded people have emerged. News transmission channels have become multidirectional paths, over which ordinary citizens and media elites engage in genuine conversations, rather than media elites preaching to silent flocks who lack opportunities for responding.

The most urgent problem looming over media development in the summer of 2009 was uncertainty about the means to pay for news creation and distribution. Clearly, advertising can no longer be the financial mainstay of established media, nor can it sustain the many new channels mushrooming on the Internet. What should take its place? What will take its place? There were numerous suggestions but no indication of the viability of any of these. It also remains unclear what choices various publics will make to assemble their individual news packages from the overabundance of available news sources on the Web. In this era of changing demographics and altered personal and business lifestyles, coupled with advancing technologies, who will determine the main thrust of political news in the second decade of the twenty-first century?

To make sense of what is currently happening one must understand the characteristics of the U.S. mass media system as well as the political, economic, and technological forces that are propelling the current transformations. The eighth edition of *Mass Media and American Politics* serves as a guide and interpreter.

It features up-to-date information about the structural and organizational characteristics of the current media system and the human factors and events that continually reshape its contours. The text focuses on news disseminated by over-the-air and cable television and by print or Web-format newspapers because they are still the chief sources of current political information for people in public and private life. But it also gives ample attention to the impact of the Internet on the information stream and on politics. The chapters highlight the many public policy issues that the new media have raised. Citizens must understand the implications of these issues so that they can voice their concerns when policies are still in the making.

The story told in this new edition draws on the rich array of current political communication studies, including my own research on television's impact on citizens' understanding of politics. The book's perspective is multidisciplinary and objective, offering a variety of viewpoints about controversial issues. Readers can form their own opinions and evaluations from this evidence and from other studies of the news media reported in the ample, up-to-date citations. The text is written simply and clearly to serve the needs of novices in this area of knowledge without sacrificing the scholarly depth, documentation, and precision that more advanced readers require.

This new edition of *Mass Media and American Politics*, like prior editions, takes a broad approach to mass-mediated political communication. It covers the impact of media on all spheres and phases of political life, at all levels of government, in normal times and times of crisis. It does not limit itself to studying the relationships between media and politics during elections, which have been the prime focus of past news media studies.

Chapters 1 and 2 set the stage with descriptions of the mass media as institutions within the U.S. political system. The chapters explain how governmental structures and functions affect journalists and media institutions and how the media, in turn, influence politicians and the work of all branches of government. The discussion highlights the consequences of the proliferation of news outlets and the continuing debate about appropriate regulatory policies. Chapter 3 completes the analysis of the legal, political, and economic framework in which U.S. media operate. The discussion focuses on the legal rights of citizens, public officials, and journalists to gather and publish information and to seek protection from damaging publicity.

Chapter 4 deals with the many factors that affect the daily selection of news topics and the creation of stories about people and events. The chapter highlights reporters' backgrounds and orientations and details how they go about their work and the major challenges they face. It also appraises the quality of current news compared to that of the past. Chapter 5 describes how news patterns change during crises, such as natural disasters and wars. It clarifies the important role of news media in dealing with the difficulties facing people and their governments when normal life is disrupted. Chapter 6 deals with the ethical problems and political consequences of political activism by journalists. I define the barriers journalists face when they investigate corruption and



other misbehaviors by public officials, business tycoons, or religious leaders. In chapter 7, I explore the wealth of new information that political communication scholars have accumulated to understand political learning and opinion formation. I also discuss the role of news in fostering pro-social and asocial behaviors, along with conflicting theories about the circumstances that increase or decrease media influence on political action.

The powerful role that news media play in a variety of political situations is the subject of chapters 8–11. These situations include media coverage of elections (chapter 8) and the interplay between the media and political institutions such as the presidency and Congress (chapter 9). In these chapters I pay particular attention to technological developments that are transforming the Internet into a political tool that can empower citizens, if they so choose. The media's role in the judicial system and at state and local levels is set forth in chapter 10. The discussion covers news about courts at the national and state levels and about the criminal justice system at state and local levels. The chapter explains the inadequacies of news about subnational political issues. Chapter 11 details the dwindling impact of American news media on global politics and even on the conduct of American foreign policy. I compare several theories about how the American press selects events abroad for coverage. The chapter also illustrates the difficult trade-offs when First Amendment freedoms must be balanced against national security concerns. *Mass Media and American Politics* concludes with an extensive discussion of developments and policy trends in the Web 2.0 era. I assess the significance of news making and distribution by citizens who lack journalism training and then examine the potential political consequences when netizens from all walks of life converse extensively via the Internet. The boxed vignette in chapter 12, about social network sites and cyberactivists, like vignettes in other chapters, casts a spotlight on an especially intriguing media innovation.

The changes in this new edition reflect the political and technological events that have transpired since publication of the previous edition, the rich crop of new mass media studies, and much-appreciated suggestions from colleagues and students who have adopted the book for their classes. I am indebted to my research assistants, especially Melanie Mierzejewski, who created new tables and figures and identified facts that needed updating. The editorial team at CQ Press and its freelance staff provided valuable assistance that greatly eased the many chores that are part of writing books. Assistant editor Allie McKay and production editor Sarah Fell did yeoman's service. As always, I am grateful to my family for cheering me on. Memories of my husband's loving support during all prior editions continue to inspire me; he was and is a source of strength in all I do.

Doris A. Graber

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## **Media Power and Government Control**

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**I**n December 2002, Sen. Trent Lott was on the verge of becoming majority leader of the U.S. Senate. News stories killed that dream. Lott's fall from political grace began with a story reported by a young reporter for ABC News, Ed O'Keefe. O'Keefe took offense at a toast that Lott made during a one-hundredth-birthday celebration for South Carolina's senator and onetime presidential candidate Strom Thurmond. O'Keefe considered Lott's toast high praise for the segregationist policies that Thurmond had embraced earlier in his career. ABC, after initially slighting the story, featured it when it exploded on the Web. When the embarrassing tale became widely known, Lott's colleagues in the Senate felt that they could not place him into this powerful position. Fear of further bad publicity led to his early retirement from the Senate in December 2007. News stories had undermined his career.<sup>1</sup>

News stories, which turned out to be false, also brought a major airline company—United Airlines—to the brink of bankruptcy just hours after they were widely publicized on September 8, 2008. The stories reported that the airline had filed for bankruptcy at a time when the economy was declining and nervous investors were keeping close watch on stock market reports. Investors panicked and dumped United Airlines stock, along with the stocks of other airlines. United Airlines stock, which had been worth about \$12 a share, plunged to \$3 in less than one hour, triggering a halt in trading. Airline stock prices recovered quickly, but not completely, when it was discovered that the bankruptcy story was based on events that had occurred six years earlier. Somehow, a story reporting a 2002 event had mistakenly resurfaced with a 2008 dateline.<sup>2</sup> Though false, it carried a devastating economic punch.

### **POLITICAL IMPORTANCE OF MASS MEDIA**

The Trent Lott and United Airlines stories illustrate how mass media reports, in combination with other political factors, shape the views of political leaders and citizens about public policies and public officials.<sup>3</sup> News stories take millions of Americans, in all walks of life, to the political and military battlefields of the world. They give them ringside seats for presidential inaugurations or basketball championships. They allow the public to share political experiences,

such as watching political debates or congressional investigations. These experiences then undergird public opinions and political actions.<sup>4</sup>

Print, audio, and audiovisual media often serve as attitude and behavior models. The images that media create suggest which views and behaviors are acceptable and even praiseworthy and which are outside the mainstream. Audiences can learn how to conduct themselves at home and at work, how to cope with crises, and how to evaluate social institutions such as the medical profession or grocery chains. The mass media also are powerful guardians of proper political behavior because Americans believe that the press should inform them about government wrongdoing. Media stories indicate what different groups deem important or unimportant, what conforms to prevailing standards of justice and morality, and how events are related to each other. In the process the media set forth cultural values that their audiences are likely to accept in whole or in part as typical of U.S. society. The media thus help to integrate and homogenize our society.

Media images are especially potent when they involve aspects of life that people experience only through the media. The personal and professional conduct of politicians, political events beyond hometown boundaries, frenzied trading at stock exchanges, medical breakthroughs, or corrupt corporate dealings are not generally experienced firsthand. Rather, popular perceptions of these aspects of life take shape largely in response to news and fictional stories in media. Like caricatures, media stories often create skewed impressions because they cannot report most stories in detail or full context. For example, thanks to a heavy focus on crime news and fiction stories, television exaggerates the likelihood of an individual becoming a victim of crime. Viewers therefore fear crime excessively, especially if they watch a lot of television.<sup>5</sup>

Attention to the mass media is pervasive among twenty-first-century Americans. The average high school graduate today has spent more time watching televised broadcasts than in school, particularly during his or her preschool and elementary school days. Even in school, media are the basis for much learning about current events. An average adult in the United States spends nearly half of her or his leisure time watching television, listening to the radio, reading newspapers and magazines, or surfing the Web. Averaged 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, relayed over the air, via cable, through the Internet, or through a videotape recorder, occupies three-fourths of this time. Despite considerable dissatisfaction with the quality of television programs in all of these modalities, television remains the primary source of news and entertainment for the average American.<sup>6</sup>

Fifty-two percent of people responding to a national survey in late spring 2008 said that they had watched local television news the day before. Additionally, 34 percent claimed to have read a daily newspaper the day before, and 35 percent said that they had paid attention to radio news.<sup>7</sup> The ability to attract such vast audiences of ordinary people, as well as political elites, is a major ingredient in the power of the mass media and makes them extraordinarily important for the



TABLE 1-1 **News Consumption Patterns, 2004 and 2008 (in percentages)**

<i>Medium</i>	<i>2004</i>	<i>2008</i>	<i>Change</i>
Local TV news	59	52	-7
Newspapers "read yesterday"	42	34	-8
Radio news "listened yesterday"	40	35	-5
Nightly network news	34	29	-5
Online news "three or more days"	29	37	+8
Fox News	25	23	-2
CNN	22	24	+2
Network morning shows	22	22	0
National Public Radio	16	11	-5
<i>NewsHour with Jim Lehrer</i>	5	5	0
C-SPAN	5	4	-1

Source: Adapted from the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "Audience Segments in a Changing News Environment," August 17, 2008, <http://people-press.org>.

Note: Telephone interviews conducted between April 30 and June 1, 2008, among a nationwide sample of 3,615 adults.

individuals and groups whose stories and causes are publicized. Although their percentages have been shrinking, as Table 1-1 shows, the traditional media retain their dominance, and the audiences for political Web sites are comparatively small. A 2007 survey reported that the total volume of traffic to political Web sites was "about the same as the typical audience for a single broadcast of *ABC World News Tonight*."<sup>8</sup> Moreover, most of the news content aired on Web sites is drawn from mainstream media reports.

Politically relevant information is often conveyed through stories that are not concerned explicitly with politics. In fact, because 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. In 2008, for example, Comedy Central's the *Daily Show* provided ample and steady coverage of the presidential election campaign in its "Indecision 2008" commentaries. NBC's *Saturday Night Live* election comedy sketches reached as many as 14 million viewers, more than most competing prime-time offerings. Young viewers in particular regularly cite *Late Show* with David Letterman and the *Tonight Show* with Jay Leno as their main sources of political information.<sup>9</sup>

Such entertainment shows portray social institutions, such as the police or the schools, in ways that either convey esteem or heap scorn. These shows also express social judgments about various types of people. For instance, television