

The Media



Americans are seeing a major decline in daily newspaper readership and an increase in the use of social media. There is also an increase in troublesome language on partisan cable news networks and the rise of artificial intelligence to generate stories.

It used to be that candidates had to be at an event but the use of AI makes it cheap and easier for political groups to create ads with fake deceptions of real people. These “**deepfake**” ads became a common feature of the 2024 elections. There is a danger that AI will mislead voters and that deceptive fake images may ultimately influence elections. It could be used to create fictitious videos of candidates or to manufacture images of fraud or violence at the polls, misleading voters.

Both Google and Meta (Facebook) have adopted policies that label content containing images or videos that were generated or altered using AI. Despite these measures, critics argue that social media companies should do more to prevent fake and misleading content on their platforms.

In August 2023, the **Federal Election Committee (FEC)** voted unanimously to advance a petition to regulate ads that use AI to misrepresent political opponents by showing them saying things they did not say or doing things they did not do. As of November 2024, proposals in Congress to regulate deepfake political ads have stalled.

In the absence of federal action, several states have taken matters into their own hands. As of May 2024, states, including Minnesota, Michigan, and Washington have enacted laws regulating AI. Minnesota’s law prohibits publishing “deepfake” media to influence an election 90 days before an election, unless the material includes a disclosure that the content has been manipulated.

The regulation of AI-regulated content raises issues about what kinds of speech are protected under the First Amendment as political speech is protected under the First Amendment. Over the last two decades, fast-paced developments in communication technology, such as new social media platforms, and the spread of AI have changed how the new media, political parties, and candidates deliver political information and opinions. These new technologies may also change how Americans access information about government and many challenge their ability to distinguish fact from fiction.

The News Media

The News Media is a broad term that includes newspapers, magazines, radio, television, internet sources, blogs, and social media postings that cover important events. [Note, the word *media* is a plural that refers collectively to many sources of communication].

Social Media are forms of electronic communications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking. Much of the news transmitted through social media is generated in traditional ways, through previously produced stories, videos, and commentaries linked or posted on social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Snapchat, X, or TikTok.

The media exercise a great deal of power as they select the stories that they cover. In their **Agenda Setting role: the media's ability to highlight certain issues and influence public views about which policies are the most important**, the media act as a gatekeeper, highlighting issues that are important enough to be covered and worth of the public's attention as well as ignoring other issues.

Agenda setting is a key function of the media in a representative democracy. According to political scientist Harold Lasswell, the media perform three important and interconnected functions:

1. To survey and report on political events and outcomes
2. To interpret those events and outcomes to the public
3. To educate citizens

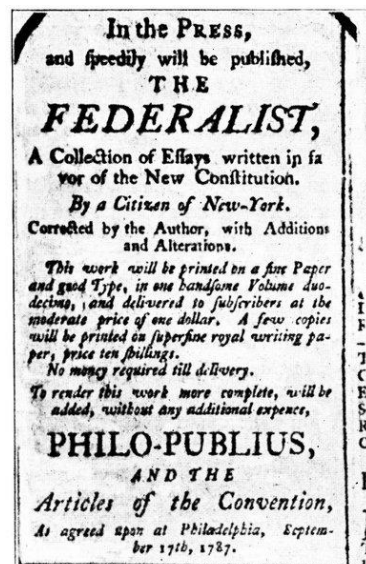
Throughout America's history, the news media have played an important role in shaping the political culture and influencing Americans' attitudes toward government and politics. Along with political parties, interest groups, and elections, the media are a linkage institution connecting citizens with government, making it easier for the government to communicate with the citizens. The media serve as a watchdog by gathering information about what the government is doing and conveying this information to the public, who then can hold the government accountable. The connection between the nation's media and the nation's politics has been shaped by technological changes throughout the country's history.

The Print Media and a New Nation

The delegates at the Constitutional Convention had been careful to prevent information from being leaked to the newspapers. The publication of the proposed Constitution led to a flood of editorials for and against the document, and newspapers took their place at the forefront of American political life in the late 1780's.

The press also played a major role in the debates about ratification of the Constitution, as the proponents and opponents of the document made their cases through the nation's newspapers, often using pseudonyms for their writings.

The ***Federalist Papers***, authored by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, first appeared as a series of essays written under the pseudonym Publius in New York newspapers. The Antifederalists, writing under the pseudonym of Brutus, produced essays warning that the proposed Constitution posed dangers to liberty.



While the Bill of Rights was not part of the original document, a promise that the new government would create one through a series of amendments proved crucial to ratification. The First Amendment states: "*Congress shall make no law . . . , abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press.*" This provided the foundation for press freedoms.

The Penny Press and the Beginning of Mass Media

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, newspapers reached only a relatively small part of the nation's population. They were expensive and often only available through annual subscriptions, which meant that people had to pay a large sum of money in advance rather than per day.

With the development of better printing presses in the 1830's, the cost of a newspaper fell dramatically. A newspaper that cost one penny (hence the "penny press") was now sold on street corners by newsies (newsboys). Within a few months of its introduction, the *New York Sun* was the city's top selling newspaper. By 1834, the *Sun* was selling 15,000 copies a day. The penny press is an early example of **Mass Media: sources of information designed to reach a wide audience, including newspapers, radio, television, and the internet.**

Newspapers depended on sales and on providing an audience for their advertisers, and so they often focused on dramatic stories of crime, riots, and scandalous behavior.



In addition to better printing presses, the telegraph system allowed news to travel instantly over distances that might have taken days or weeks otherwise. The **Associated Press (AP)** created a wire service, and organization that gathers the news and offers it for sale to other media outlets.

The nineteenth century also saw a new approach to news coverage with investigative **journalism: when reporters dig into stories, often looking for instances of wrongdoing.** Rather than covering the speeches and opinions of political leaders, they dug into stories about their personal lives.

During the Progressive Era (1900's to 1920's), a group of investigative reporters became known as the **muckrakers**, named after a rake, used to dig up mud. Theodore Roosevelt made the term popular, and at first it was seen as criticism of journalists. Muckrakers used investigative journalism to expose wrongdoing and to shape public opinion in support of regulating businesses and reducing corruption in government.

The Birth of Radio and Television

Technological advances during the 20th century brought political figures into American homes. Radio and Television, which are examples of **broadcast media**, brought political news to citizens directly and immediately. Listening to the radio or watching television was often a shared experience, with only one radio or television set in the home or even in the neighborhood. People could now learn about the news while doing other things, such as driving, doing chores, working, or even while having dinner. Mass media was a shared experience because people nationwide were exposed to the same stories. By breaking down geographic barriers, the broadcast media were truly national in scope.

In 1960, candidates John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon participated in the first televised debates in American history. While experts and radio listeners did not declare a clear winner, those who watched it on television thought that Kennedy won the debate. Kennedy's image on television came across as robust and energetic, while Nixon, who had been fighting the flu, appeared pale and sweaty. In 1961, having won the presidency, Kennedy gave the first televised news conference.



As more Americans relied upon the major television networks for their news and coverage of political events, news anchors became trusted figures in describing and interpreting the events. As the Vietnam War progressed, and American casualties mounted, and protests against American involvement spread, trusted television journalist **Walter Cronkite** questioned if the war had become unwinnable. It was widely reported that President Lyndon Johnson observed "If I've lost Cronkite, I've lost Middle America." This saw a time that a trusted news anchor could affect American public opinion in vital areas such as domestic and foreign policy.

In 1980, **CNN**, the **Cable News Network**, provided Americans with the nation's first twenty-four hour news channel. Then, in 1996, Australian media entrepreneur, Rupert Murdoch launched the cable network **Fox News**, a conservative perspective of the nation's news and political events.

Cable television is subject to fewer government regulations, and it quickly became unapologetically partisan. **Partisan news networks reinforce the existing political beliefs of their viewers, which may increase political polarization among citizens.**

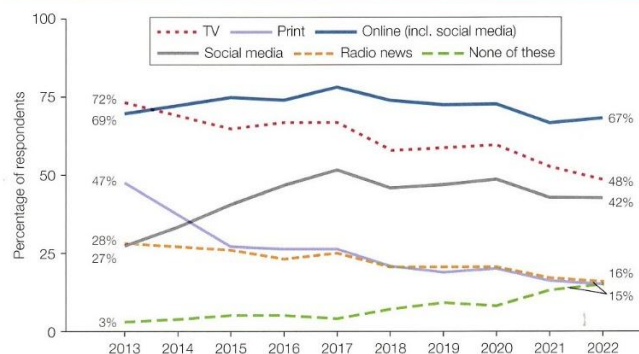
As radio companies began losing ground to cable news organizations, they attempted to win over narrower but more loyal audiences. Radio programs filled the air with political commentary and harsh criticism of those who shared different viewpoints. Some programs were clearly conservative, such as *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, which ran from 1984 to 2021. Other radio shows appealed to liberal audiences, such as the *Rachel Maddow Show*, which later moved to television. These talk radio broadcasts have been criticized for their efforts to provoke emotional responses (such as anger, fear, and moral indignation) by conveying overgeneralizations, sensationalism, and misleading or patently inaccurate information, and by ridiculing their political opposition.

New Media: New Freedom and New Problems

The term **New Media** refers to all the various digital platforms through which individuals receive, share, and produce content. Broadband reception, the Internet, and other communication technologies enable Americans to receive and send text, sound, and video at increasingly fast speeds and increasingly large volumes.

The birth of the Internet saw a rapid decline with print newspapers. Traditional papers went online, sometimes for free and with advertisements, and sometimes behind firewalls that required subscriptions.

Proportion of Americans That Used Each News Source in the Past Week, 2013–2022

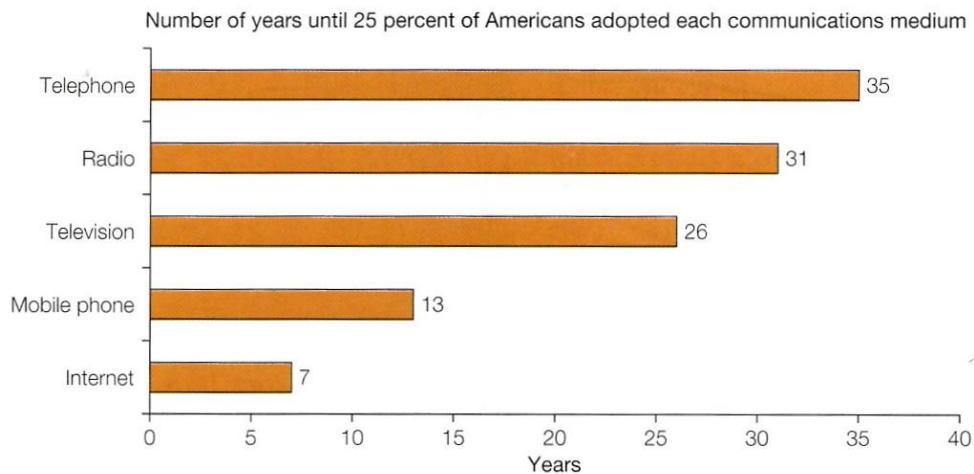


Data from Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022.

In the era of 24/7 news coverage and the merging of entertainment and news media, the lines between the roles of reporter, entertainer, and celebrity have been blurred as media companies attempt to capture the public's attention.

Just as the public profile of professional journalism has evolved, the idea of who can be a journalist has broadened. The Internet and modern communication technologies allow anyone to capture, report on, and transmit news more quickly and cheaply as ever before. Nonprofessionals film events on their cell phones and these are accompanied by their own commentaries and opinions of what is taking place. Some scholars argue that this form of **Citizen Journalism** makes America more democratic. Others worry that while the larger networks have the capabilities to factcheck their stories, ordinary citizens who record events have not met journalistic standards and their stories may be distorted or even made up.

Pace of Change in Adoption of Communications Media



Data from *The Economist*.

Just as radio, television, and cable did in the 20th century, new media forms have the potential to bring us together by ending geographic boundaries but they can also separate us politically by allowing people to select from increasingly personalized, and often ideologically based, sources of information and political views, often shutting out other viewpoints.

Some studies suggest that most Americans are politically moderate, but people who view ideologically driven news may become more entrenched in their partisan beliefs. Compared to viewers of multiple news sources, people who watch only one single news source are less trusting of other sources and are more likely to surround themselves with friends who share their same political views.

Public Policy Regulating the Media

As radio and television became more popular, both citizens and the federal government pushed for regulations of the broadcast media. Some wanted to make sure that what was shown was suitable for young children to see, others wanted to regulate the political content of both radio and television broadcasts to make sure that multiple political views were represented.

The **Radio Act** of 1927 established the **Federal Radio Commission** which required broadcasters to obtain a license to broadcast on specific frequencies. The **Communications Act** of 1934 expanded the federal government's role in regulating the nation's broadcast media, creating the **Federal Communications Commission (FCC)** to oversee the implementation of its regulations. Also, the 1934 Act established "equal time," a rule that required broadcasters to offer all candidates the same amount of advertising time at the same rates. The **Telecommunications Act** of 1996 reduced regulations in an effort to encourage more market competition.

Regulation of the media raised concerns about the balance between the constitutional right of freedom of the press versus the government's need to protect liberty and order. This issue was clearly seen with the Supreme Court case of ***New York Times Co. v. United States*** in 1971 where the Court ruled that the government may not use prior restraint to censor a story (about the Vietnam War) before it is published, unless the stories publication would endanger national security.

A link to the above case is at: <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1970/1873>

Until the 1980's, the federal government imposed regulations to keep media diversity and prevent consolidation. **Media consolidation** is the concentration of ownership of the media by fewer corporations. The FCC regulations prevented a single corporation from owning too many TV stations or newspapers and reaching to large of an audience. The general idea behind this was to prevent media consolidation and strengthening the First Amendment.

In the 1980's, in the Reagan era, the FCC Chairman, appointed by the president, Mark Fowler, began deregulating the media which led to the consolidation of companies. The **Telecommunications Act** of 1996, signed by President Clinton, significantly raised the percentage of a national audience that an individual corporation was allowed to reach. It also raised the limits on the number of media outlets that one corporation could own.

President Trump’s FCC chair relaxed rules preventing media consolidation, making it possible for news sources to be held by fewer and fewer corporations. In 2018, a federal court decision allowed further consolidation when it approved the \$ 85 billion merger between AT & T and Time Warner.

Media consolidation often means that national, and even local news coverage, is overseen by business leaders at the head of large, national companies, not by journalists on the ground. Corporate executives now make the decisions as to how the news is reported. Despite these consolidations, there are still some excellent local newscasts in the nation that offer in-depth coverage of issues and are important in their states and communities.

More than 90% of the U.S. Media is co trolled by the “Big Six” Corporations



Regulating the Internet

During the Obama administration, the FCC developed neutrality rules that prevent Internet and broadband companies from charging more for “fast lanes” that deliver content more quickly. The new rules also prohibited Internet providers from blocking content or slowing it down.

In June 2016, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit in a 2-1 vote upheld the FCC's net neutrality rules. Net neutrality also came up in the 2016 presidential election.

Democratic candidate Bernie Sanders tweeted that the ruling "will help ensure that we don't turn over our democracy to the highest bidder," while Republican candidate Ted Cruz called net neutrality "Obamacare for the Internet."

The Trump administration reversed net neutrality rules on the grounds that they were excessive and unnecessary and that they deterred investment in new technologies. Under the Biden administration, the FCC sought to assert authority over broadband networks and restore net neutrality rules, but as of late 2024, federal appeals courts had blocked these efforts.

Unlike television and radio stations that are licensed by the FCC, social media channels are available to anyone who has Internet access, and this includes political candidates.

Political candidates who are also celebrities can obtain disproportionate attention on social media channels based on their election status. In both the 2016 and 2020 elections, Donald Trump used his large following on X (formerly Twitter) to get media coverage without having to purchase as much airtime as the other candidates.

As president, Trump makes unprecedented use of X, TikTok, and his own site Truth Social, to convey his viewpoints to the general public. Truth Social is owned by Trump through his Trump Media & Technology Group.

How the Media Shape American Politics Today

As news corporations consolidated, they expanded their reach and their powers to set the policy agenda. The more power the media have, the more concern there is about who is providing political news and whether or not they are fair or unbiased.

One of the most important developments in the Internet age has been the rise of social media outlets, such as Meta, X, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok. These interactive media sites allow individuals to create or share text, images, and videos as well as comment on content and forward it to others.

Social Media can cause problems for politicians. As they are often acting and speaking in a sea of cell phones and cameras, they must always be aware that any spontaneous, off-the-cuff remarks that they may make could be posted on various channels within minutes.

According to a 2020 Pew Research Center study, people who get most of their news on social media have lower levels of knowledge about foundational political principles, political news, and current events.



The New Media and the Reshaping of What is News

The pressure to attract larger audiences has led to news outlets to focus on **infotainment**, the merging of information and entertainment in a way that is designed to attract viewers and gain a larger market share. This dynamic also includes the pressure to provide “**soft news**” which are stories that focus on celebrities, personalities, and entertaining events, rather than news about significant events of local, national, or international political or economic significance.

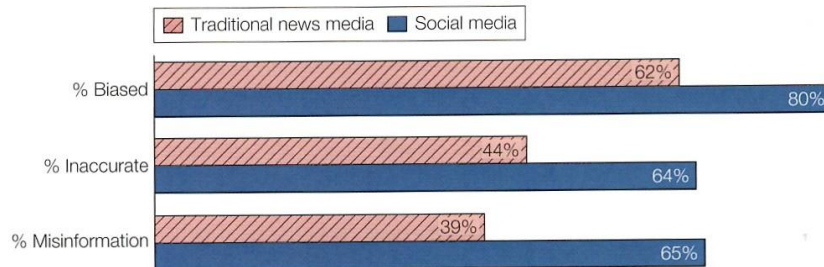
Other concerns with the merging of news with entertainment is that viewers of political comedy shows may decrease individuals support for government, exposing them to political issues but also increasing cynicism at the same time. There is also concern that soft news may decrease the amount of knowledge about public affairs, knowledge that is necessary for effective democratic governance.

Some people claim that American news media has a **Partisan Bias: the slanting of political news coverage in support of a particular political party or ideology.**

Those who believe the media have a liberal bias point out that journalists are more likely than members of the general population to identify as liberal. Opponents argue that although most journalists are liberal, they are supposed to operate under norms and professional expectations that reward objectivity. The perception that the media are politically biased might be shaped by certain media outlets that run stories on the “biased media” theory encouraging their readers, listeners, or viewers to believe a bias exists. Remember, as earlier stated, some cable news stations are candidly biased.

Americans' Perceptions of News Coverage

Estimate by the average U.S. adult of bias, inaccuracy, and misinformation in news coverage.

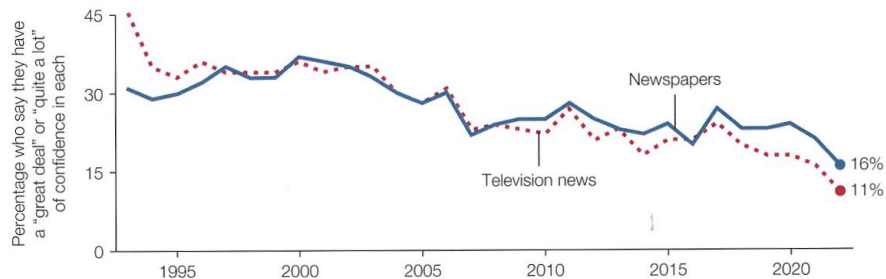


Data from Gallup.

According to a poll taken in 2018, nearly two-thirds of adults believe that traditional news media are biased, and even more believe that social media is biased. This demonstrates that Americans do not have much faith in the neutrality of the news media as a whole.

Concerns about bias in the media have been accompanied by a lack of trust in the credibility of news sources. Confidence in newspapers and television news fell dramatically from 1995 to 2020.

Americans' Confidence in Newspapers and Television News



Data from Gallup.

The news media, even those outlets that are operated as a nonprofit entity, need to attract an audience. They need viewers to listen and watch what they are producing and they shape their coverage accordingly. Some news outlets pursue inflammatory, sensational coverage in order to attract and maintain viewers and increase their market share and profits.

Stories about government regulations or public service and public policies are often seen as boring narratives that do not attract a large audience. However, if there is a major disaster or event then there is coverage to show some of the underlying problems. In a competitive marketplace, news is based on providing interesting narratives, stories that we want to read, hear, watch, and share or repost. It is easy to criticize the news media for failing to report the “important stories,” however very few people would watch the “Federal Bureaucracy Channel.”

The Impact of the Media on Campaigns and Elections

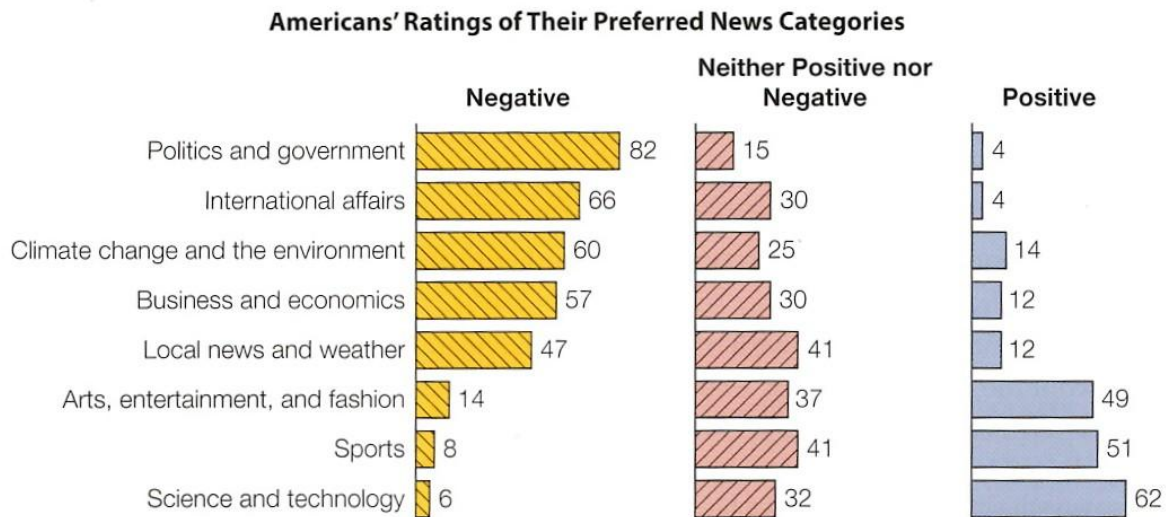
The drive to attract an audience shape how media outlets cover political campaigns and elections and it affects how candidates represent themselves. When covering political campaigns, news outlets may focus on the latest polls. Emphasizing the drama of who is winning, rather than the policy difference between the candidates is called **horse-race journalism**. The coverage of political campaigns focuses more on popularity and on factors other than qualifications and platforms.

Scandals also sell, tempting media outlets to focus on missteps, gaffs, and wrongdoings. These coverages take over the discussions of policy.

The increase in news sources over the past decades might help Americans become more informed about government or politics. Citizens who were previously disconnected from the political process may become interested again by connecting with friends and family members. However, not all people use social media the same way. Some may follow the news more closely while others avoid the news as there are so many other forms of digital entertainment available to them. The Internet has widened the gap between real-time news and those who prefer entertainment. Older and low-income Americans are less likely to use the Internet. This gap between Internet users and those who do not use the Internet is called the **Digital Divide**.

There is still the issue that asks can the average American distinguish between fact or opinion in statements issued by the media outlets? The news media provide a critical link between citizens and their government. Traditional news media, citizen journalism, and entertainment news programs can provide useful information. Yet it can be difficult to distinguish between credible sources from those that are poorly researched, inaccurate, biased, or satirical. Citizens have to view the news today with a critical eye.

It is important for people to pay attention to what is going on locally, within their state or within the nation’s capital so that they can take action when needed and their voices can be heard.



Data from Survey Center on American Life