CHAPTER

1

The Landscape of Media and Politics Today

The 2016 Presidential Election

In the tumultuous 2016 presidential campaign, Donald Trump rode a wave of economic discontent, anti-Washington anger, and nativist blame of "the Other" to one of the most stunning political upsets in recent American history. The Manhattan real estate mogul and reality TV star had no experience in government. But he defeated Hillary Clinton—one of the most prominent and experienced politicians in the country—in her bid to become the first female president of the U.S. by fashioning himself as the friend of the forgotten "common man" who would "drain the swamp" in Washington, D.C., and fight for voters, particularly those who felt displaced and unheard through lost jobs, multiculturalism, and globalization.

Hillary Clinton won the popular vote by nearly 2.9 million votes,[1] but Trump's surge in voters in previously Democratic Rust Belt states as well as in rural areas was missed by almost every major poll, including the candidates' own internal polling. Pollsters and pundits had confidently predicted a Clinton win on the night of the election, missing the surge and calling their research methods into question.[2]

After the election, many in the news media and political capitals of Washington, D.C., and New York questioned if they had missed the Trump phenomenon by living in a blue state, urban bubble. "To put it bluntly, the media missed the story," *Washington Post* media columnist Margaret Sullivan wrote the day after the election.[3]

Donald Trump

Trump—who announced his candidacy in 2015 with a speech that characterized Mexican immigrants to the U.S. as "rapists" and "drug-dealers"[4]—received huge free media attention for his incendiary remarks and promises to build a wall across Mexico, deport eleven million immigrants living in the U.S. illegally, and temporarily ban Muslims from entering the country.[5] His comments about women—from Fox News Channel anchor Megyn Kelly to Republican primary opponent Carly Fiorina—were capped in the final month of the campaign with the release of a 2005 *Access*

Hollywood off-camera video in which Trump was heard making vulgar comments and boasting about groping women.[6]
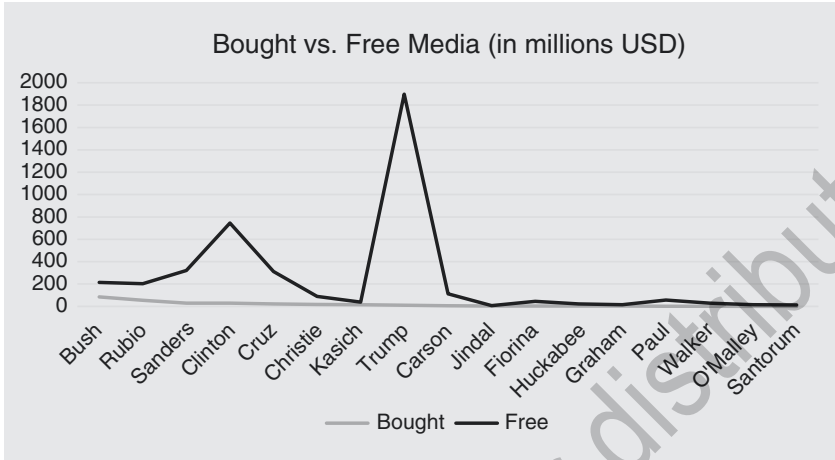
Trump—whose rhetoric was condemned, including by Republican House Speaker Paul Ryan, during the primaries[7] for fanning the flames of racism, misogyny, and fear of immigrants—won the white vote by record margins. According to exit polls, Trump won 71 percent of non-college-educated white men but also 61 percent of non-college-educated white women.[8] Clinton won overwhelmingly among nonwhite voters as well as winning among women overall.[9] But an expected big increase in voting by Latinos did not occur, and the level of support for Clinton among African Americans, Hispanics, and Asian Americans was less for Clinton than their support for Barack Obama, the nation's first African American president, in his 2012 reelection.[10] Many women, in particular, were dismayed that Trump's misogynistic remarks about women did not lead to a higher turnout and higher margin for Clinton among women overall, and there were protests among college students and other young people who expressed fears about Trump's campaign promises and their future.[11]

There were several contradictory messages in the exit poll election results. Clinton won voters who thought the economy was the most important issue; a majority of voters said they disagreed with Trump's plans on immigration, but his stances on immigration, along with criticism of U.S. trade policy, were decisive issues for his supporters.[12] Clinton and Trump were both historically unpopular nominees,[13] and voters who expressed serious reservations about Trump's qualifications and temperament still voted for him.[14] In an interview with the author, one Democratic strategist who worked on Clinton's campaign said, "We did not account for cognitive dissonance in our focus groups."[15] Four in ten voters said a candidate who "can bring needed change" was the most important character trait, with "has the right experience" (Clinton's strong suit) second.

One need only look at the extraordinary amount of free news media coverage—and high ratings—that Donald Trump received in the 2016 Republican presidential primaries and the general election to see that his canny understanding of the live cable TV news environment, the bias of the news media toward conflict and outrageous remarks, and the commercial needs of the news media all helped fuel his rise to the Republican nomination and the ardent support he built among millions of supporters.

According to an analysis by mediaQuant, a firm that tracks media coverage of candidates and assigns a dollar value to media coverage, based on source, for comparable paid advertising, Trump earned $2 billion worth of *earned media, unpaid media coverage and commentary*, across print, broadcast, and other sources as well as online-only sources such as Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit over the course of the Republican primary campaign and into the important Super Tuesday primaries. Trump, who did not have a super PAC and was spending little on TV advertising or ground organization

Figure 1.1 Bought versus Free Media

Bought vs. Free Media (in millions USD)

A line chart plotting Bought and Free media values (0 to 2000, in increments of 200) across candidates: Bush, Rubio, Sanders, Clinton, Cruz, Christie, Kasich, Trump, Carson, Jindal, Fiorina, Huckabee, Graham, Paul, Walker, O'Malley, Santorum. The Free media line peaks sharply at Trump (~1900) and has a smaller peak at Clinton (~750).

Legend: —— Bought —— Free

Note: **As of February 2016

Sources: Data from mediaQuant, SMG Delta, and the *New York Times*.

during the primaries, had in media coverage, as the *New York Times* put it, earned "about twice the all-in price of the most expensive presidential campaign in history" as well as twice the estimated $746 million of earned media for Hillary Clinton.[16]

At the same time, the then-insurgent Democratic primary campaign of Vermont senator Bernie Sanders and his support, particularly among young people, for proposals regarding income inequality, the cost of college, and campaign finance reform was initially dismissively covered—and under-covered—for many months, including by the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. The initial coverage, TV punditry, and attitude of officials in the Democratic Party about Sanders reflected a bias toward establishment candidates and the two-party system as well as the inside-the-Beltway media-politics echo chamber that for several months missed Sanders' appeal and his significant fundraising among small-dollar donors online. The ratio of minutes of coverage of Senator Sanders' campaign compared to Donald Trump's—on the three broadcast evening newscasts on ABC, CBS, and NBC—was a startling eighty-one to one in 2015, according to the Tyndall Report, a long-running analysis of the per-topic minutes on the broadcast evening news.[17]

Hillary Clinton

In postmortems among Democrats, Clinton and her team were criticized for not campaigning and reaching out more to working-class and blue-collar voters in swing states who had lost jobs and wages through

factory closings and a slow economic recovery and also for not clearly articulating how she would help voters in the economy.[18] Clinton struggled to present a compelling message in the face of Trump's attacks. She focused instead on using Trump's own words—where he was mocking and condemning individuals and groups as well as talking about using nuclear weapons in foreign policy—against Trump in TV commercials that were designed to prove Trump temperamentally unfit to be president.[19]

It is difficult to separate the possible impacts of Clinton's gender from her long history in Washington and her own controversies, including an FBI investigation of her use of a private email server as secretary of state. An in-depth analysis of election coverage in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Los Angeles Times* as well as the broadcast networks, CNN and Fox News Channel found that coverage of both Clinton and Trump was "overwhelmingly negative in tone and extremely light on policy" in a "nasty" campaign that continued a trend decried by political scientist Thomas E. Patterson, author of the report from the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy, at Harvard University. "A healthy dose of negativity is unquestionably a good thing," Patterson wrote. "Yet an incessant stream of has a corrosive effect. It needlessly erodes trust in political leaders and institutions and undermines confidence in government and policy," resulting in a media environment with many false equivalencies that can mislead voters about the choices they make.[20]

One such false equivalence, Patterson wrote, may have been coverage of Clinton's use of a private email server. Coverage of the two candidates, he said, was "virtually identical" in terms of the negative tone. "Were the allegations surrounding Clinton of the same order of magnitude as those surrounding Trump?" Patterson asked. "It's a question that political reporters made no serious effort to answer during the campaign."[21]

The FBI in 2016 found Clinton's use of a private email server while secretary of state "extremely careless" but recommended that no charges be filed against her.[22] A government investigation completed in 2019 found no deliberate mishandling of private information by Clinton.[23] But the email server story was cited by voters in focus groups as evidence of Clinton's untrustworthiness and allowed Trump to repeat his label for her—"crooked Hillary"—to supporters who chanted "Lock her up!"[24] After the election, many voters at the time expressed disgust with politics and the 2016 campaign as well as skepticism about whether either nominee could unite the country.[25]

The Role of Identity Politics

The Republican establishment—which initially had backed former Florida Governor Jeb Bush as the presumptive nominee and then saw Trump emerge among a crowded field of seventeen presidential candidates

during the primaries and TV debates—missed the anger at the establishment (including the Republican establishment) and disaffection over lost jobs and changing demographics that Donald Trump tapped into and stoked. Ronald F. Inglehart of the University of Michigan and Pippa Norris of Harvard, along with other researchers and scholars, have linked Trump's election to the surprising Brexit vote by British voters to leave the European Union and the growth of right-wing populism worldwide, attributing these forces not only to lost jobs and globalization but also to changing demographics and a "cultural backlash" among some against rapid social change.[26]

At the same time, the second media narrative that emerged—that Trump voters were overwhelmingly "working class" and even poor in terms of income—was belied in 2017 by analysis of the long-running American National Election Studies, which found that only 35 percent of people who said they voted for Donald Trump in 2016 had incomes below $50,000 per year.[27]

In 2016 President Trump was accused of using what are called "dog whistle politics," which political scientist Ian Haney Lopez defined as "sending a message about racial minorities inaudible on one level, but clearly heard on another."[28] Dog whistle appeals have a history in American politics. Trump was overt in his characterizations of people of color and immigrants as taking over the country and responsible for the problems faced by the white working class. And his slogan "Make America Great Again" strongly implies that America today is no longer great because, as he asserted in his 2015 announcement speech, Mexican immigrants were "rapists and murderers" "bringing drugs" and their problems while America was "laughed at" by the Chinese.[29]

In their 2018 book *Identity Crisis, The 2016 Presidential Campaign and the Battle for the Meaning of America*, coauthors John Sides of George Washington University, Michael Tesler of the University of California, Irvine, and Lynn Vavreck of the University of California, Los Angeles analyzed extensive voting and polling data and concluded that, to a degree not seen in the 2008 and 2012 Republican primaries, it was issues of *identity*—race, religion, gender, and ethnicity—*not* economics—that determined how people voted, particularly voters who were white.[30]

"What made this election distinctive was *how much* those identities mattered to voters," the authors wrote. "During Trump's unexpected rise to the nomination, support for Trump or one of his many rivals was strongly linked to how Republican voters felt about blacks, immigrants, and Muslims, and how much discrimination Republican voters believed that whites themselves faced. . . . These same factors helped voters choose between Trump or Hillary Clinton in the general election—and again, these factors mattered even more in 2016 than they had in recent presidential elections. More strikingly still, group identities came to matter even on issues that did not have to be about identity, such as the simple question of whether one was doing okay economically."[31]

In what was viewed as a backlash against the Trump presidency and the 2016 election, Democrats dramatically shifted the balance of power in the House of Representatives in the 2018 midterm elections, gaining control of the House. Voters eighteen to twenty-nine years old increased their percentage of voting, while women, particularly white college-educated women, increased the gender gap between the Republican and Democratic Parties in the voting.[32] A record number of women were elected or appointed to Congress, with 102 women, including 43 women of color, serving in the House, and 24 women, including four women of color, in the U.S. Senate.[33] Republicans made gains in the Senate, reflecting a divided country, including between cities and suburbs and rural communities.[34]

Impeachment

In 2019 President Trump became only the third president in U.S. history to be impeached,[35] on charges of abuse of power and obstruction of Congress. Democrats charged that the U.S. president had pressured the president of Ukraine to investigate the business dealings of former vice president Joe Biden and his son in Ukraine by withholding nearly $400 million in military aid approved by Congress to help Ukraine defend itself against Russian military intervention; the president, they said, had endangered U.S. national security interests in an attempt to influence the 2020 election and later to obstruct the congressional investigation.[36]

President Trump and his defense team repeatedly denounced the Democrats, the impeachment inquiry, and trial, which began with a White House whistleblower's official complaint expressing concerns about the president's phone call to the president of Ukraine, as a "witch hunt" and a "hoax" and a "brazen" attempt to reverse the results of the 2016 election.[37] Rep. Adam Schiff, the California Democrat who chaired the House Intelligence Committee, was a frequent guest on MSNBC's *The Rachel Maddow Show*, and she and other MSNBC hosts emphasized the testimony of diplomats and White House national security officials during the House inquiry. Covering the testimony from witnesses in the House and then the debate in the Senate impeachment trial, host Sean Hannity and other prime-time hosts on Fox News Channel praised President Trump and repeated the president's criticisms of the motives of the Democrats and the diplomats and White House national security officials who testified in the House inquiry.[38]

While CNN, MSNBC, and National Public Radio (NPR) covered the Senate trial live in its entirety, including the defense of the president's actions by his lawyers, Fox News Channel turned away from the House Democratic leaders' arguments to air their prime-time hosts criticizing the trial instead.[39] "The goal of this entire process is not to remove the president from office, it's simply to remove certain Republican senators," Republican senator Tim Scott of South Carolina told reporters.[40]

Representative Schiff, the California Democrat who led the Democrats making the case during the Senate impeachment trial, made an emotional closing argument that went viral, urging the Republican-majority Senate to vote to remove the president from office.[41] In the end, a divided Senate, as expected, voted to acquit the president of the charges against him in a vote that split along party lines, with only one Republican senator, Mitt Romney, the 2012 Republican presidential nominee, voting guilty on the charge that the president abused his power for political gain in his dealings with Ukraine.[42] President Trump retweeted an attack ad that called Romney a "Democrat secret asset" and declared what he called "our Country's VICTORY on the Impeachment Hoax."[43]

A Gallup poll of Americans taken amid the Senate impeachment trial found 52 percent of respondents favoring acquitting the president, with 46 percent in favor of convicting and removing him from office.[44] The president's approval rating overall had risen to 49 percent, his highest since he took office, with nearly 50 percent of respondents disapproving of his performance. Trump had increased his approval rating among independents several points, to 42 percent, while his support among Democrats had dropped from 10 percent to 7 percent in recent months. The president's approval rating among Republicans in the Gallup poll was 94 percent, resulting in the biggest gap in approval measured to date by Gallup, higher than the previous record, between Barack Obama and Trump.[45] In the same poll, 63 percent approved of Trump's handling of the economy.[46]

The 2020 Presidential Campaign and Election

In the 2020 presidential campaign, the initial field of Democratic candidates was both historically large and historically diverse. The field included a record six women running to be the first female president of the U.S.: Massachusetts senator Elizabeth Warren, California senator Kamala Harris, Minnesota senator Amy Klobuchar, New York senator Kirsten Gillibrand, Hawaii representative and military veteran Tulsi Gabbard, and author Marianne Williamson. There were two African American candidates, New Jersey senator Cory Booker along with Kamala Harris. Also running was Julián Castro, who is Latino and a former cabinet official in the Obama administration.[47]

Another candidate, businessman Andrew Yang, is Asian American. Former South Bend, Indiana, mayor and Afghanistan War veteran Pete Buttigieg was the first openly gay presidential candidate—and, running at thirty-seven, Buttigieg would have been the youngest president if elected.[48]

Joe Biden, the seventy-seven-year-old former senator and vice president under Barack Obama, had entered his third campaign for president with some hesitation, he said, but a determination to defeat Donald Trump.[49] Vermont senator Bernie Sanders, seventy-eight, who had mounted an insurgent campaign and done well against Hillary Clinton in several 2016

primaries, emerged as a front-runner in 2020, raising millions of dollars online and attracting a loyal following among young people, in particular, with his calls for "Medicare for All" and reforming income inequality and "corporate greed" on Wall Street. Warren, an Oklahoma-born Harvard law professor who had built the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau under President Obama,[50] linked her family's personal story to her plans for "structural change" in health care and taxes on Wall Street. Billionaire businessman and former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg entered the race well into the campaign, spending more than $500 million on advertising in states where he planned to compete in the March multistate Super Tuesday primaries.[51]

As we know now, after highly watched debates, intense campaigning and media coverage, and strong shifts in the standing of candidates in polling and voting in primaries, the race for the Democratic nomination came down to a two-person contest between Biden and Sanders. Biden—who had faltered in TV debates and with voters in early contests in Iowa and New Hampshire—scored a major victory in South Carolina, particularly among African American voters, after winning the important endorsement of longtime South Carolina Representative Jim Clyburn. In dramatic moments carried live on television, Klobuchar and Buttigieg ended their campaigns and endorsed Biden on the eve of the Super Tuesday primaries as the more moderate wing of the Democratic Party sought to consolidate support for the candidate they and many voters viewed as a safer choice who was more electable against Donald Trump. For Democrats, "what set the tone and template for 2020 . . . wasn't the DNC [Democratic National Committee] or the primary calendar," wrote Amy Walter, national political editor of the *Cook Political Report*. "It was the single-minded focus on 'electability.'"[52]

The COVID-19 Pandemic

The coronavirus pandemic that swept around the world in the spring of 2020 upended world economies and plans for the 2020 presidential election. The U.S. was ill-prepared for the pandemic—and President Trump faced severe criticism for his downplaying of the disease and his administration's handling of the crisis, especially from the time the virus emerged in China in late December[53] until the beginning of May.[54] Economies around the world were shut down—and devastated—in a global economic depression. Among the 3.8 million cases reported between January and May 2020, the U.S. alone registered 1.7 million cases of COVID-19, the illness caused by the new virus.[55] More than seventy-five thousand people in the U.S. had died, with the government predicting nearly a doubling of that total by August at the same time that President Trump was pressing states to reopen.[56]

The stock market crashed as businesses and the economy were shut down in measures to curb the spread of the highly contagious disease. In April, 20.5 million Americans suddenly lost their jobs, according to the Labor Department, creating an unemployment rate of 14.7 percent, which was the highest since the 25.5 percent of the Great Depression in 1932.[57]

The coronavirus crisis revealed, reflected, and *amplified* both an economic divide and a partisan divide in politics and the media in this country, with Fox News Channel prime-time hosts dismissing the risks and blaming Democrats and the news media for allegedly exaggerating the crisis. As we will discuss in Chapter 7 on international news, the divides had significant impact on how the pandemic has been perceived— and experienced—and how voters viewed the president during the 2020 campaign.

In the 2020 election, President Trump reportedly had hoped to run on a strong economy and profits on Wall Street, despite criticism from Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren that tax cuts under Trump had widened economic disparities overall. If Bernie Sanders, a self-described Democratic socialist, or Elizabeth Warren, had won the Democratic nomination, Trump and the Republicans would have been able to more successfully attack the candidate and down-ballot Democrats as tax-and-spend, "non-democratic" socialists who would ruin the American economy with excessive regulation. "Americans of all political beliefs are sick and tired of the radical, rage-filled, left socialists," Trump told supporters at a campaign rally in January 2020. "Really, the Democrat Party is the socialist party and maybe worse."[58]

Trump and Vice President Mike Pence tried to make that argument first against the more moderate Joe Biden and senator Harris, the Democrats' vice presidential nominee. In the wake of widespread protests and calls for police reform after the death of George Floyd, Trump doubled down on racial appeals in 2020, emulating the 1968 presidential campaign of Alabama governor George Wallace in portraying himself as the "law-and-order" president protecting voters against "lawless" protesters and anarchists.[59] Trump was widely criticized for his refusal to disavow white supremacists in the first presidential debate and, on the eve of the election, was losing support among white suburban women and seniors who had supported him in 2016. Harris, the first woman of color and only the second woman (after Geraldine Ferraro) to win the vice presidential nomination of a major party, dubbed Trump's appeals "a dog-whistle through a bull-horn."[60]

With the stock market collapse and record unemployment claims, along with more than 210,000 deaths by October in the coronavirus pandemic, Biden and the Democrats made the election a referendum on President Trump and his handling of the pandemic.

Media-Centered Politics

It is hard to imagine today, but American politics once reflected the stereotypical "smoke-filled room" where strong parties and party bosses picked candidates, and the public once had direct access to candidates and even to the president within the White House. Today, national politics is conducted primarily through the media, including the *media primary*, where the media, in effect, vet potential candidates.

"The United States is the only democracy that organizes its national election campaigns around the news media," Thomas E. Patterson wrote in his book *Out of Order*. Patterson called the news media "the miscast institution" for their role in the democracy. "Even if the media did not want the responsibility for organizing the campaign, it is theirs by virtue of an election system built upon entrepreneurial candidates, floating voters, freewheeling interest groups, and weak political parties."[61] Many journalists take very seriously their role in the democracy and in today's media-centered politics, often providing more context and analysis in reporting than in political reporting in years past. Yet, the nature and practices of news-gathering—what we will call here the *conventions of news-gathering*—along with economic pressures often create a disconnect between the commercial imperatives of the media and the public interest needs of the democracy.

There has always been a tension for major news media between giving the public *what they need to know* versus *what they want to know*, as former CBS News president Richard Salant memorably described it in an interview with the author.[62] But today, news media that traditionally have played a major role in the democracy are under twin pressures—from the growth of Internet advertising sapping their advertiser-supported business model to increasing concentration of ownership of the media by a few major corporations that bring layoffs, cutbacks in coverage, and increased pressure for short-term profits.

It is difficult for serious work in journalism to even break in to the cacophony of today's media environment, in which all kinds of communication across all kinds of platforms are considered "the media" and "the news" by the public. Ratings and readership of the news since the 2016 election are up on cable TV and online on the sites of the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and some other national news sites and publications, but many local newspapers are struggling.

U.S. voter participation remains relatively low compared to other developed countries, especially during nonpresidential years, with more motivated voters affecting party primaries while others stay home. In the 2016 presidential election, nearly one hundred million Americans—representing 43 percent of the eligible voting-age population—did not cast a vote for president.[63]

Many people are simply not paying attention to news—or politics—today. A landmark study of nonvoters, published by the Knight Foundation in 2020, found nonvoters reporting feeling variously overwhelmed, confused, and skeptical of the contemporary media environment as well as the state of politics and the political system.[64] A year before the 2020 presidential election, in a survey by the nonpartisan Pew Research Center, some 46 percent of social media users said they were feeling "worn out" by the number of political posts and discussion they were seeing on their social media—a 9 percent increase in the response from the summer of 2016.[65]

The Landscape

Today we live in challenging times for media, politics, and the democracy—and it is more important than ever to examine the intersection and impact of these forces. Faith in the democracy—and democratic institutions—has declined in the U.S. and globally. President Trump's attacks on the news media, labeling journalism he disagreed with "fake news" and even, ominously, calling journalists "treasonous" and "the enemy of the people,"[66] have alarmed First Amendment scholars and media critics from a range of political perspectives who have raised concerns about the long-lasting impacts of undermining the important role of the news media in the democracy.

The contemporary media-political environment has been redrawing the lines of credibility and authority in news media and changing the ways that politicians, journalists, and members of the public interact with each other, with impact on politics, policy, and the media. Describing what had emerged as "one of the most frustrating challenges faced by candidates Barack Obama and John McCain" as far back as the 2008 presidential campaign, *New York Times* political reporter Adam Nagourney wrote, "The proliferation of communications channels, the fracturing of mass media and the relentless political competition to own each news cycle are combining to reorder the ways voters follow campaigns and decide how to vote. It has reached a point where senior campaign aides say they are no longer sure what works, as they stumble through what has become a daily campaign fog, struggling to figure out what voters are paying attention to, and not incidentally, what they are believing."[67]

These trends have only accelerated in recent years, with the growth of the Internet and social media, a bifurcated cable news environment, and an assault on the very notion of agreed-upon facts. It was Trump adviser Kellyanne Conway who coined the phrase "alternative facts" to defend then-press secretary Sean Spicer's false statement about the number of people who attended the president's inauguration,[68] and the president himself tweeted and retweeted conspiracy theories and outright falsehoods to

his millions of Twitter followers in ways that traditional media were hard-pressed to keep up with. President Trump frequently set the agenda for news media, particularly on cable and online, via his Twitter feed, announcing foreign policies that surprised his own advisers or railing against his opponents in provocative ways that cable TV shows and other media found irresistible to report.

At the end of 2019, a team of fact-checkers at the *Washington Post*, using a database to categorize and analyze the president's statements, counted that the president had made 15,413 false or misleading statements from 2017 to the end of 2019—many of them repeated multiple times on Twitter, on subjects from immigration and the impeachment inquiry to his assertion on the eve of the 2020 presidential election that the strong U.S. economy was the best in U.S. history.[69]

President Trump presented a conundrum for major media in the U.S., which have for many years promoted an ideal of objectivity and separating facts from opinion in their news coverage—a concept that also has been criticized as *false objectivity*, as we will discuss in Chapter 4. The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, in particular, along with CNN, have been targeted as "failing," liberal, and even "treasonous" by Donald Trump for their reporting on him and his administration.[70] "We're not at war with the administration—we're at work," *Washington Post* executive editor Martin Baron said in 2017.[71]

With President Trump's attacks on specific news organizations and journalists, the distinction between facts and opinion—already blurred on cable television shows mixing journalists and political strategists—became even more strained as prime-time cable TV hosts on CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News Channel readily stated their opinions about the president.

Where Americans get their news today is a significant factor in determining what people believe. In a poll published after the midterm elections in 2018, the *Washington Post* found that "even as Trump's fact-free statements proliferate, there is evidence that his approach is failing," with "fewer than 3 in 10 Americans—including 4 in 10 Republicans" in the poll believing "his most-common false statements."[72] Yet, in that same poll, "a pool of strong Trump approvers—about 1 in 6 adults"—accepted "several, although not all," of the president's falsehoods as true.[73] Respondents who listed Fox News Channel as one of their top news sources were more likely to believe the false statements tested in the 2018 *Post* poll than those saying Fox News Channel was not a main news source.[74] Along with these disparities in media consumption and belief, today's politics and political structure also rewards polarization, in primaries and in Congress. A simple but important truth is that it is difficult for citizens and political leaders to work together—and to consider outcomes to be legitimate—if they cannot agree on a basis set of facts.

The First Amendment

The First Amendment to the Constitution gives news media protections against government interference because the framers of the Constitution believed that a free press provided a vital check against abuse by the government. This is known as the *watchdog role of the media* in the democracy, an ideal that the public traditionally has supported, despite criticism of the media—that the news media deserve protection, as they have under the First Amendment, in order to serve the public interest as an independent watch on corruption and government abuse.

The First Amendment is part of the Bill of Rights that was added to the Constitution in 1791 to protect civil liberties.[75] It states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."[76] As many observers have noted, this is the *first amendment* in the Bill of Rights because of the importance attached to these civil liberties.

Thomas Jefferson famously wrote this in a letter in 1787, "The basis of our governments being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right. And if it were left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter."[77]

As historians have noted, Jefferson did not anticipate the highly partisan press that followed; as president and like other presidents, he was critical of the media and even moved to curb a critical press at one point.[78] Still, he remained a champion of the First Amendment, writing in 1823 that "the only security of all is in a free press."[79]

The infamous Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 may have proved his point. These acts, passed by a Federalist-controlled Congress in anticipation of an expected war with France, passed restrictions on immigration and prohibited any criticism of the Federalist government by opposing Democratic-Republican publications but did not extend to publications that supported the Democratic-Republicans. When he was elected president in 1800, Jefferson pardoned the journalists for Democratic-Republican publications who had been convicted by Federalist judges under these laws, which flew in the face of the First Amendment.[80]

U.S. governments have regularly curbed freedom of the press and limited journalists' access in wartime—from Abraham Lincoln's unconstitutional attempts to prosecute journalists who criticized his conduct of the Civil War[81] to the Office of War Information that restricted images of the war during World War II.[82] The Obama administration and the Trump administration both have pursued prosecutions against government sources for allegedly leaking information to journalists that the government said compromised national security.[83]

Two modern-day landmark U.S. Supreme Court cases have helped define freedom of the press: In the first case, *New York Times Co. v. Sullivan* in 1964, a Montgomery, Alabama, city commissioner sued the *New York Times* and four Black clergymen for an ad the *Times* published from supporters of Dr. Martin Luther King that Sullivan said was false and defamatory against him. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled that in the case of a government official or a person running for office, in addition to proving that the statements were false and defamatory, the government official or candidate must prove "actual malice" and "reckless disregard for the truth" by the publication in publishing the account.[84]

In what is known as the *Pentagon Papers* case, in 1971, first the *New York Times* and then the *Washington Post* began publishing classified documents from a Vietnam War–era government history of U.S. involvement in Indochina from World War II to 1968 in the Vietnam War. Leaked to the newspapers by Daniel Ellsberg, who had worked on the report, the documents proved that the John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson administrations had expanded the war in Vietnam and told the American public as well as the news media that the war was being won when intelligence and military officials were saying for years that the war was not being won by the U.S.—and that it was effectively unwinnable, for many reasons.[85]

The Nixon administration, citing "immediate and irreparable harm" to national security, obtained a restraining order enjoining the *Times* and the *Post* from publishing. The case, *New York Times Co. v. United States*, went to the U.S. Supreme Court, with the editors and publishers under pressure from stockholders and business interests as well as under threat of criminal prosecution. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of the news organizations, saying that the government had failed to justify prior restraint of publication.[86]

At the end of 2019, the *Washington Post* published a groundbreaking, six-part series based on classified interviews with military commanders and others conducted at the time by the U.S. government and obtained by the *Post* through yearslong Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) public record requests and a legal battle about the U.S. war in Afghanistan. The documents and interviews starkly revealed that in the George W. Bush administration and, later, the Obama administration, "senior U.S. officials failed to tell the truth about the war in Afghanistan throughout the eighteen-year campaign, making rosy pronouncements they knew to be false and hiding unmistakable evidence the war had become unwinnable."[87] The war in Afghanistan, launched to fight terrorism by the Bush administration after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, was the longest armed conflict in U.S. history. The *Post* investigation has been dubbed this generation's *Pentagon Papers* case.

Public Opinion on Media Credibility

The credibility of the news media overall has declined in recent years, as has the credibility of other major institutions, not only in Congress, the presidency, and TV news but also big business, the criminal justice system, and organized religion, according to Gallup and other polling.[88] "The story of the past half-century is the steady degradation of trust in the institutions and gatekeepers of American life," Ben Domenech, cofounder of the Federalist, a conservative news site, told the *New York Times* at the end of 2019. "Everything from politics to faith to sports has been revealed as corrupted or corruptible."[89]

Yet, in this atmosphere, the public has continued to say that they want the news media to fulfill their role as a watchdog in the democracy. Despite criticisms of accuracy, fairness, and independence of the news media, "broad majorities of Americans continue to say the press acts as a watchdog by preventing political leaders from doing things that should not be done, a view that is as widely held today as at any point in the past three decades," Pew researchers found, with support for the media's watchdog role rising ten points from 58 percent to 68 percent, from 2011 to 2013 "in the wake of revelations [in the news media] about government activities, including the NSA [National Security Agency] surveillance program and the IRS [Internal Revenue Service] targeting of political groups."[90] In 2018, in the annual nonpartisan Freedom Forum survey of public attitudes toward the First Amendment, 74 percent of respondents agreed with the statement that "it is important for our democracy that the news media act as a watchdog on government," a slight uptick from 68 percent in 2017.[91]

Most recently, trust in news media during the Trump era was showing an increased partisan divide amid strong tensions between Donald Trump and major news organizations and amid the president's repeated attacks on the media. Trust in media dropped to an all-time low of 32 percent saying they had a "great deal of confidence" in the media in 2016 in Gallup polling, which Gallup researchers attributed at least in part to Donald Trump's attacks on the news media.[92] In 2018, the percentage of those who said they had "a great deal of confidence" had increased to 45 percent. That number was the highest since 2009 overall, with Democrats trusting the media more than Republicans but trust also increasing among Republicans and independents.[93]

At the end of 2019, however, the Pew Research Center was finding that partisan dynamics and political party affiliation were "overshadow[ing] other factors in Americans' evaluation of the news media."[94] The researchers found Trump's strongest supporters expressing the lowest confidence in journalism and journalists' ethics.[95]

Declining—and partisan—trust or mistrust in the news media did not begin with Donald Trump, however; and some media ethics groups as

well as news organizations are exploring ways to improve trust, including through greater transparency about news-gathering as well as promoting the First Amendment and the value of a free press to the public. "Trust in media is a vital and urgent problem," Indira Lakshmanan, the former ethics chair of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, said in an interview with the author.[96]

Perceptions of Media Bias and Political Polarization

Many people today believe charges from some Republicans and conservative media critics over the years that the news media have a liberal bias in their reporting. More recently, supporters of Sen. Bernie Sanders and liberal media critics have accused the news media of having a "corporate" bias in their reporting on progressive candidates and proposals that they say challenge the corporate status quo. The allegations of liberal bias in the media were prominent in critiques from the Nixon administration during the Watergate era—and they have been a daily feature on Fox News Channel and conservative talk radio for many years.

Survey results over the years have indicated that journalists are more liberal than the population overall.[97] In their long-running study, journalism professors Lars Willnat, David Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit wrote in 2013 that they found a majority of full-time journalists identifying themselves as independents, while those who said they were Democrats had dropped since 2002 to about 28 percent, "moving this figure closer to the overall population percentage of 30 percent," according to a 2013 ABC News/*Washington Post* national poll. "This is the lowest percentage of journalists saying they are Democrats since 1971," the authors wrote. "An even larger drop was observed among journalists who said they were Republicans in 2013 (7.1 percent) than in 2002 (18 percent), but the 2013 figure is still notably lower than the percentage of U.S. adults who identified with the Republican Party (24 percent according to the poll mentioned previously)."[98]

Journalists for mainstream news organizations dispute the notion of liberal bias in major media, for example, citing critical coverage of Democrats and criticism of their coverage from both the Left and the Right as proof of evenhandedness. (Friendly coverage of Ronald Reagan, for example, belies the "liberal" charge, as do critiques of media coverage in the 2016 election.)

Journalists rightly draw a distinction between how one may vote as a private citizen versus one's role as a fair reporter, and mainstream news media in the U.S. today have a journalistic process and culture that values objectivity and balance to such a degree that they have been criticized for an overreliance on officialdom and objectivity that has led to false equivalences.

Despite anecdotal allegations of liberal bias, researchers in multiple studies have not found systematic liberal bias in mainstream media. Instead, they have found that, as Jonathan M. Ladd wrote in *Why Americans Hate the Media and How It Matters*, to emphasize *being told* the media are biased has impact on people's perception.[99]

"Despite research to the contrary, the general public and a significant number of politicians are convinced the U.S. news media have a liberal and pro-Democratic bias," Tien-Tsung Lee wrote in one study.[100] "Findings based on two large national surveys suggest that audiences' ideologies and partisanships affect how they view the media. Strong conservatives and Republicans are more likely to distrust the news media."[101] Researchers for Pew Research Center have found similar partisan divides.

While charges of liberal, conservative, or corporate bias in the media are important to consider here, there are *operational and cultural biases* in the way that news is determined, gathered, and distributed that happen *every day*. In Chapter 4 we will decode these often-unspoken cultural norms of journalism—from a bias toward immediacy to groupthink and an inside-the-Beltway punditocracy—and how they affect what the public sees and reads.

There is debate about the causes of political polarization in politics and the media today, including whether polarization in Congress came before polarization in the public as well as the impact of polarized media outlets on politics. But, according to several major studies and surveys, both the major political parties and voters are more polarized ideologically than in the past twenty years. Political scientists Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal have developed a metric that they have used to calculate votes by both Democrats and Republicans in Congress; they have found that, after decades of relatively little political polarization in Congress, ideological polarization began to rise and increase rapidly since the 1970s. Today, Congress "is more polarized than at any time since the end of Reconstruction."[102]

In their book *It's Even Worse Than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided with the New Politics of Extremism*, Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein, who had traced recent historical trends in dysfunction in Congress, declared that the two major sources of dysfunction were (1) "the serious mismatch between the political parties, which have become as vehemently adversarial as parliamentary parties, and a governing system that, unlike a parliamentary democracy, makes it extremely difficult for majorities to act" and (2) a move to the right and "away from the center of American politics" by some in the Republican Party.[103]

An article by Princeton University professor Nolan McCarty, titled "What We Know and Don't Know about Our Polarized Politics" and published in the *Washington Post*, summarized points of agreement from a task force on political polarization and its impacts on negotiation and governance convened by the American Political Science Association. McCarty

said that "evidence points to a major partisan asymmetry in polarization" in Congress. McCarty added, "Despite the widespread belief that both parties have moved to the extremes . . . each new cohort of Republicans . . . has taken more conservative positions on legislation than the cohorts before them" and "any movement to the left by the Democrats can be accounted for by a decline in white representatives from the South and an increase in African-American and Latino representation."[104]

At the same time, a yearlong survey of ten thousand adults in the U.S. in 2014 by the Pew Research Center found that Republicans and Democrats were "further apart ideologically than at any point in recent history," with the center getting smaller, growing numbers of Americans expressing consistently conservative or consistently liberal opinions, and Democrats and Republicans expressing more negative views about the other party than before. "Political polarization is the defining feature of early 21st century American politics, both among the public and elected officials," the author of the report, Carroll Doherty, concluded.[105] "The most ideologically oriented Americans" among Democrats and Republicans "make their voices heard through greater participation in every stage of the political process," from self-reported voting rates to political donations.[106] Appealing to Americans who may be somewhat in the middle and not easily classified—for example, young people who may be liberal on social issues but conservative on government—remains a challenge to political parties and voter turnout, especially in non–presidential election years.[107]

The Economics of News

In order to understand the interplay of politics and media and how that impacts the role of the media in a democracy, it is important first of all to understand how the business of American media works. Major American media are almost exclusively commercially owned, with the exception of National Public Radio (NPR) and the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). NPR and PBS are nonprofit public media underwritten by foundations, corporate and individual contributions, and some government funding.

Ownership of the media today is increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few huge entertainment and media corporations. Major news organizations that historically have played a significant role in exposing abuse, wrongdoing, and neglect are under pressure. The broadcast TV network news divisions of CBS News, NBC News, and ABC News—which focused national attention on the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, and other important stories of the 1960s and 1970s—had been somewhat exempt from financial pressure in news-gathering, according to interviews with news executives and journalists who were there at the time.[108] This was because the prime-time entertainment shows on the so-called Big Three broadcast networks were making tremendous profits, while their

news divisions, which were also making money, were touted to Congress and the public as fulfilling their public interest obligations in exchange for operating on the public's airwaves.

Today, TV news, particularly cable TV news, is a major profit center for the corporations that own them; but news is one brand among many required to make profits. Newspapers, in particular, are in crisis as they face serious challenges: first, to their advertiser-supported business model with advertising going to the Internet and second, from cutbacks, layoffs, and even closure with consolidation under large corporations and hedge funds.

Federal Communications Commission and Deregulation of Media Ownership

According to the Communications Act of 1934, local TV stations, the largest of which are owned by the national broadcast TV networks, are licensed by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to operate in the "public interest, convenience and necessity" in exchange for operating for free on the airwaves, which are owned by the public.[109] The fact that the public owns the airwaves, as a scarce resource, appears to be little known by the public today, especially as station license renewals have become much less rigorous and license challenges much more rare. Cable television is not regulated by the FCC, although cable TV networks, along with Hollywood studios, have reacted to pressure from Congress. In the late 1990s, for example, under bipartisan pressure from Congress, the White House, children's television advocates, and the FCC, the TV networks and entertainment companies agreed to voluntarily institute a movie-style TV ratings system for children's programming[110] and to require three hours of educational programming each week for children.[111]

The head of the FCC and the commissioners are political appointees—and which party, Republican or Democratic, is in the White House and thus has the majority on the FCC, impacts rulemaking at the FCC. The Internet has traditionally not been subject to government regulation because it has been seen as a "common carrier"—a carrier like the telephone, not a publisher. But that could change in the future—or lead to further self-regulation by Facebook, Twitter, and other Internet giants—with public concerns about privacy and evidence of fake news and disinformation on the sites.

Deregulation of media ownership began under the Ronald Reagan administration, with corporations arguing that consolidation was needed to compete locally and that the marketplace would decide which media enterprises should survive. The lifting of restrictions, for example, on the same company owning both the local newspaper and the local TV station—and caps on how much of the national TV station market one corporation can control—led to an era of approved media mergers in the 1990s that

led to rapidly increased concentration of media ownership. CBS, ABC, and NBC all merged with or were acquired by larger entertainment-based global corporations, Viacom, Disney, and Universal, respectively,[112] while Time Inc. (which owned *Time*, *People*, and other magazines) merged with Ted Turner's CNN and other cable networks as well as AOL.com before becoming Time Warner with the Warner Bros. entertainment company. In 2016, telecommunications company AT&T agreed to buy Time Warner, the home of CNN and HBO, for about $85.4 billion in a merger that would create a giant for creating content and distributing it, from phones to satellite television.[113] As Table 1.1 indicates, even great consolidation and bigger mergers are continuing today.

Table 1.1 Who Owns What in the Media

National Amusements	Major Holdings
	• ViacomCBS
	o BET
	o CBS All Access
	o CBS Entertainment
	o CBS Interactive
	o CBS News
	o CBS Sports
	o CBS Television Studios
	o Comedy Central
	o MTV
	o Nickelodeon
	o Paramount Network
	o Paramount Pictures
	o Paramount Television Studios
	o Pluto TV
	o Showtime Networks
	o Awesomeness
	o Bellator
	o CBS Sports Network
	o CBS Television Distribution
	o CBS Television Stations
	o Channel 5
	o CMT
	o Colors
	o Network 10 Australia
	o Pop TV
	o Simon & Schuster
	o Smithsonian Channel
	o Telefe
	o The CW

	○ TV Land ○ VH1 ○ ViacomCBS Global Distribution Group ○ VidCon - Showcase Cinemas
The Walt Disney Company	**Major Holdings** - Disney Channel - ABC - Freeform - ESPN - FX - National Geographic - Disney Parks, Experiences and Products, Inc. - The Walt Disney Studios - Walt Disney Animation Studios - Pixar Animation Studies - Marvel Studios - Disneynature - LucasFilm Ltd. - Disney Music Group - Disney Theatrical Group - Blue Sky Studios 20th Century Studios - Searchlight Pictures - Disney+ - ESPN+ - Hulu - Hotstar
AT&T	**Major Holdings** - AT&T Communications - WarnerMedia ○ Home Box Office (HBO) ○ Cinemax ○ TNT ○ TBS ○ truTV ○ Otter Media ○ CNN ○ HLN ○ Turner Sports ○ Bleacher Report ○ DC Entertainment

(*Continued*)

Table 1.1 (Continued)

	○ Cartoon Network ○ Adult Swim ○ Boomerang ○ Turner Classic Movies ○ Warner Bros. business units • AT&T Latin America • Xandr

Comcast Corporation	**Major Holdings**
	• Xfinity
	• NBCUniversal Media
	  ○ Universal Television Alternative Studios
	  ○ Universal Parks & Resorts
	  ○ Bravo
	  ○ E!
	  ○ Olympic Channel
	  ○ Oxygen
	  ○ Syfy
	  ○ Universal Kids
	  ○ USA Network
	  ○ Universal Cable Productions
	  ○ NBC News
	  ○ MSNBC
	  ○ CNBC
	  ○ NBC Sports
	  ○ NBC Golf
	  ○ Peacock
	  ○ Fandango
	  ○ GolfNow
	  ○ Hulu
	  ○ SportsEngine
	  ○ NBCUniversal Telemundo Enterprises
	  ○ Cozi TV
	  ○ TeleXitos
	  ○ NBCUniversal Owned Television Stations
	  ○ hayu
	  ○ DreamWorks Animation
	  ○ Universal Studios
	  ○ Universal Pictures Home Entertainment
	• Sky
	• Comcast Business
	  ○ Focus Features

Fox Corporation	Major Holdings
	• Fox News Media
	• Fox Sports
	• Fox Entertainment
	• Fox Television Stations

Newspapers and Local TV Stations	

News Corp	Major Holdings
	• News Corp Australia
	○ *The Australian*
	○ *Daily Telegraph*
	○ *Herald Sun*
	○ *Courier-Mail*
	○ *The Advertiser* (Adelaide)
	○ *The Mercury* (Hobart)
	○ *Northern Territory News*
	○ *Townsville Bulletin*
	○ *Cairns Post*
	○ *Gold Coast Bulletin*
	○ *Geelong Advertiser*
	○ *Weekly Times*
	○ *Vogue Australia*
	○ *Vogue Living*
	○ *GQ Australia*
	○ Taste.com.au
	○ Fox Sports
	○ Foxtel
	○ Sky News Australia
	○ REA Group Ltd
	• News UK
	○ *The Times*
	○ *Sunday Times*
	○ *The Sun*
	• Dow Jones
	○ *Wall Street Journal*
	○ *Barron's*
	○ MarketWatch
	○ Factiva
	○ *Financial News*
	○ DJX
	○ Dow Jones Risk & Compliance
	○ Dow Jones Newswires
	○ Dow Jones VentureSource
	• *New York Post*
	• HarperCollins Publishers

(*Continued*)

Table 1.1 (Continued)	
	• News America Marketing • Move, Inc. • Storyful
Sinclair Broadcast Group	**Major Holdings** • Owns 191 stations
Gannett	**Major Holdings** • *USA Today* o ReachLocal digital marketing company • 261 local daily brands • United Kingdom-based Newsquest Media Group manages more than 165 news brands and more than fifty magazines online and in print
Tegna	**Major Holdings** • Operates sixty-two television stations (including those serviced by Tegna) and four radio stations, including ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox affiliates

Sources: investors.cbscorporation.com; viacom.com; viacbs.com; thewaltdisneycompany.com; investors.att.com; cmcsa.com; foxcorporation.com; newscorp.com; sec.gov; gannett.com; investors.gannett.com; investors.tegna.com; cnn.com; indiewire.com; nytimes.com; wsj.com; focusfeatures.com; newsquest.co.uk (May 2020).

One concern about consolidation of ownership is that it limits the voices and views audiences hear and see, providing not real choice but an illusion of choice among media. The dominance of Sinclair Broadcast Group in TV station ownership and what they were revealed to be doing with it is one example of what can happen. With the lifting of regulatory caps, Sinclair, by 2016, owned 173 local TV stations covering 40 percent of TV station ownership.[114] Sinclair has been criticized for promoting a conservative news agenda and commentary among its stations. In 2018 the company was revealed to be dictating that its ostensibly local TV anchors deliver identical anti–news media attacks in on-air promos that seemed drawn from Donald Trump's talking points. A compilation video published by the sports website *Deadspin* showed dozens of anchors at Sinclair-owned stations repeating identical statements that the media were "extremely dangerous for democracy," and some irresponsible "members of the media" were using their platforms to publish "biased and false news" to "control exactly what people think."[115]

Sinclair anchors had told CNN media reporter Brian Stelter that they were extremely uncomfortable with the corporation's requirement, with which nearly fifty anchors complied.[116] The compilation tape went viral and caused an uproar, with the head of the Republican-controlled FCC and advocacy groups objecting to Sinclair's proposed acquisition of another large TV station group in 2018. The proposed $3.9 billion deal subsequently was terminated by the corporations.[117]

In music, Clear Channel Communications (now called iHeartMedia) controls the airplay of music across a coast-to-coast commercial radio network.[118] As Table 1.2 indicates, ownership on the Internet has also grown increasingly more concentrated, with Facebook acquiring Instagram and other properties, and Google buying YouTube. Google alone owns many properties, from Gmail to Google Maps, that can provide advertisers with detailed analytics about customers' online activities and that have raised concerns about preferential treatment of allied companies and the recreation of a "walled garden" invisibly limiting choice, even on what seem to be the wide-open spaces of the Internet.

Table 1.2 Two Internet Giants

Facebook, Inc.	Major Holdings
	• Facebook (social network)
	  o Facebook Messenger
	  o Facebook Blueprint
	  o Facebook IQ
	• Instagram
	• WhatsApp
	• Oculus
	• Facebook Audience Network

Alphabet Inc.	Major Holdings • Google • YouTube • Android • Google Maps • X Development LLC • Google Fiber • Verily Life Sciences LLC • Sidewalk Labs • Calico • GV • CapitalG • Jigsaw

(*Continued*)

Table 1.2   (Continued)
- DeepMind Technologies   - Waymo   - AdMob   - Google Marketing Platform   - Google AdSense   - Google Nest   - Advanced Technology & Projects   - Google Cloud   - Loon LLC   - Wing Aviation LLC

Sources: facebook.com; oculus.com; x.company; abc.xyz; verily.com; boards.greenhouse.io/sidewalklabs; googlepress.blogspot.com; jigsaw.google.com; deepmind.com; waymo.com; marketingplatform.google.com; admob.google.com; android.com; google.com; nest.com; atap.google.com; cloud.google.com; youtube.com; businessinsider.com; loon.com (May 2020).

The Roles Media Play

According to the annual survey by the American Society of News Editors, there were thirty-eight thousand full-time newsroom jobs at newspapers in 2012, a decrease from more than fifty-six thousand jobs a decade earlier.[119] Newspapers employed 62 percent of U.S. newsroom employees in 2008; a decade later, that figure was less than half, at 40 percent in 2018.[120] Newspapers, many of which had large staffs of reporters in the days when newspapers were making large profit margins and had a monopoly on news and advertising, have seen their profit margins and their staffs shrink in recent years, as they have lost circulation and advertising to the Internet.

Many of these previously family-owned media companies were bought by larger corporations and hedge fund companies. The longtime business model of newspapers—that advertising revenue and circulation support and finance reporters and staff doing journalism—has been upended with cutbacks, layoffs, and consolidation.

Major newspapers have innovated online, but ads online bring in much less revenue—and newspapers that have given their content away for free online, including via Facebook and social media, are now warily negotiating with Facebook to share revenue and erecting paywalls and subscriptions online to get readers to pay to help finance the journalism they're used to getting for free.

At the same time, with deregulation, increased concentration of ownership, and short-term financial goals set to please investors and Wall

Street, there have been tremendous layoffs and cutbacks in newspaper employment. Digital media jobs are growing in some cities, especially on both coasts of the U.S., and digital subscriptions at the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Wall Street Journal* are increasing. But in local newspapers in major cities as well as smaller ones, there is a decline in newspapers that concerned critics are calling a crisis in local journalism that has serious implications for media and the democracy.[121]

"The persistent financial demands of Wall Street have trumped the informational needs of Main Street," media critic David Carr wrote about such moves in the *New York Times*.[122]

Behind the statistics that were just provided, here are some examples: The *Times-Picayune*, which had won many awards for its investigations of local New Orleans and Louisiana state governments as well as its coverage of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, announced in 2012 that its new owners were ceasing daily publication after two hundred years as a daily presence in the community, despite strong circulation and protests from the community.[123] The *Los Angeles Times*, once a family-owned newspaper with a large staff including national and international correspondents as well as local reporters, had rounds of staff and budget cuts under the Tribune company.[124] Alden Global Capital, a hedge fund, has been buying local newspapers, from the *Denver Post* to the *Orange County Register*, instituting deep cuts in staff and local coverage over public protests and resignations—even by their editors.[125] "There's no long-term strategy other than milking and continuing to cut," said *Newsonomics* expert Ken Doctor.[126] In 2020, Alden began pursuing the Tribune company, owner of the *Baltimore Sun* and the *Chicago Tribune*.

Also in 2020, the respected McClatchy newspapers, the nation's second largest newspaper chain and owner of the *Miami Herald*, the *Sacramento Bee*, and other award-winning newspapers, declared bankruptcy, with a hedge fund becoming their majority stockholder and their national news editor tweeting out some of the many impactful local news investigations McClatchy journalists were working on.[127]

Gannett, which owns *USA Today* as well as newspapers, trade publications, and local TV stations, announced plans to eliminated 1,000 positions in 2008; in 2011 the company laid off about seven hundred employees.[128] At the end of 2019, shareholders at Gannett, which owned over one hundred newspapers, and GateHouse Media, whose parent company owned nearly 400 newspapers in 39 states, voted to approve a merger that would have one in six newspapers in the U.S. owned by the same new company.[129] Both Gannett and GateHouse have a reputation for cutting staff— and many observers expressed concerns that the up to $300 million in cost savings the two companies said the new merger would bring inevitably would mean new rounds of layoffs and cutbacks in coverage. "The GateHouse-Gannett merger is another nail in the coffin for the state of our news and information system," former FCC Chairman Michael Copps said.[130]

Gains for the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*

In a significant departure from trends under new corporate owners, Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon, personally purchased the *Washington Post* for $250 million in 2013 from the Graham family, the longtime family owners. Rather than cut staff and resources, the *Washington Post* has been able to invest in additional reporters and resources for reporting and has successfully moved the *Post* from a print and largely local publication losing advertising revenue to a profitable business with digital subscriptions and national and international readership online.[131] The *New York Times*—which has remained primarily family owned by the descendants of Adolph Ochs, who bought the newspaper in 1896—also has faced declining advertising revenue, in print and digital. But the New York Times Company, in 2019, had a record-breaking year in terms of digital-only subscribers, adding one million new digital subscribers to end the year with a record 5.25 million total subscriptions across all of their print and digital products.[132] Because of the subscription revenue, one newspaper analyst wrote, "The paper now sits well above its national newspaper peers and breathes an entirely different atmosphere than its local newspaper brethren."[133] The *Wall Street Journal* has been a national newspaper, with a paywall and subscriptions, for a number of years. Other newspapers, including the *Los Angeles Times*, which was bought by a new owner in 2018, have struggled to compete digitally.[134]

The *Washington Post* has won numerous Pulitzer prizes for investigative reporting in recent years under executive editor Martin Baron, who, as editor of the *Boston Globe*, led the Pulitzer Prize–winning investigation into child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church that is depicted in the Oscar-winning movie *Spotlight*. In an interview with the author in 2016, Baron said that serious reporting is essential to journalism: "There is an essence to who we are—I like to call it our soul; the businesspeople call it the brand; I'll call it the soul. People need to have confidence that you will work on their behalf. They may not like the results, but they need to have confidence that you will be working on their behalf. . . . There's a lot of talk these days about the responsibility of the press. I believe the single most irresponsible thing we could do would be to abandon this kind of work [investigative reporting] and to stop holding powerful interests accountable."[135]

Declining Local News and Civic Engagement

The local news crisis was not immediately obvious; today, in addition to the changes described here, there are towns and areas across the country known as "news deserts," where the local newspaper has ceased publication, leaving the city and region without a vital source of news and information.

Continuing deep cuts in staff and coverage, of course, means less attention to events and issues in local and regional government as well as less possibility for deeper reporting and investigative journalism. In addition, researchers in new research are finding surprising impacts on politics and policy from the decline of local newspapers. In a report for the Brookings Institution,[136] research analyst Clara Hendrickson and other Brookings researchers have found that, as Hendrickson wrote, "places that have seen local news sources and reporters disappear are more likely to see an increase in the costs of municipal bonds."[137] In other studies, political scientists have found fewer candidates running for mayor and evidence suggesting a decline in voter participation in state and local elections as newspapers have declined.[138]

Hendrickson noted, "The decline in local journalism is a national concern, too. Voters in communities that experience a newspaper closure are more likely to vote for the same party for president and senator compared to voters in communities that did not lose a local newspaper, exacerbating national political polarization. Meanwhile, the poor health of local newspapers means national newspapers have fewer local outlets to turn to and fewer sources on the ground to inform national coverage."[139]

The coronavirus pandemic brought praise to many local and national news organization for their coverage of their communities—but it also led to many further layoffs and even closures in local news. A coalition of public interest groups, authors, journalists, and public officials called for $5 million in aid to local news outlets as part of the economic stimulus aid to small businesses being provided by Congress despite many journalists' traditional resistance to government involvement in news-gathering.[140]

There has been a decline in the number of Washington, D.C.-based reporting by local newspapers on their congressional delegations.[141] Local TV news, which remains a primary source of news for many Americans, already was devoting little time to stories about politics and government (3 percent, according to a study of sample local newscasts, in 2012, compared to 40 percent for traffic, weather, and sports—plus interesting videos of accidents and disasters, reflecting many TV consultants' business advice that local TV viewers don't care about politics and government).[142]

In a study of more than ten thousand stories on House races in the 2010 and 2014 midterm elections, political scientists Jennifer Lawless and Danny Hayes found decreases in coverage in both numbers and substance in stories from one midterm to the next. Then, in a survey of nine thousand five hundred respondents testing knowledge of the 2010 and 2014 races before each election, they found what they determined was a correlation between political knowledge and political engagement and the substance and amount of the political coverage.[143]

The Importance of Cable TV News

Cable news has shown real growth—in profits, ratings, and influence—in politics over the past several years. Not only primary debates but also town halls on cable with Pete Buttigieg and other, lesser-known candidates in 2020 boosted their name recognition and polling, aides said. "Aides to every major Democratic presidential campaign have told *The Daily Beast* that they've been stunned by the degree to which the conversation taking place on cable and national news has impacted the trajectory of the race," Sam Stein and Maxwell Tani wrote. Although cable news was not the only factor, they reported that "at a time when the party is trying to utilize new mediums to expand its reach beyond the traditional electorate, it's been the old, stodgy TV press—fed by print reporters-turned-pundits—that has had the biggest tangible impact."[144]

The growth of Fox News Channel as the highest-rated cable news network created an ideologically bifurcated cable news landscape. Fox News Channel was created in 1996 by media mogul Rupert Murdoch and former Republican strategist Roger Ailes after Ted Turner's founding of CNN as the first global, twenty-four-hour news channel. Fox News Channel did not invent polarization in politics and in Congress—but it has abetted and amplified it, playing a major role in shaping the media landscape and political discourse today. Fox News Channel—which has been the largest cable TV network for many years in terms of viewers and profits estimated at $1 billion annually—is watched by many more Republicans than Democrats.

MSNBC, the third cable news network, is watched by many more Democrats than Republicans and has fashioned itself as the "anti-Fox," with Rachel Maddow and other liberal prime-time hosts. CNN—the first twenty-four-hour cable news network—had struggled in recent years in the ratings on a slow news day and against Fox News Channel's highly rated prime-time opinion shows and hosts like Bill O'Reilly, Sean Hannity, and Tucker Carlson. But since the 2016 election, CNN gained, in ratings and in profits, by focusing on political news and punditry in prime-time. CNN had its most-watched month ever in January 2021 and was the highest-rated cable news network during this period. Fox News Channel dipped in the ratings as some viewers, angry over the network's election-night news coverage, turned to conspiracy theories about the election on the small Newsmax and OAN networks. But Fox News Channel finished 2020 first in cable news ratings for the nineteenth consecutive year.[145] And the network moved a more traditional news program with anchor Martha McCallum out of its 7:00 p.m. time slot to make way for a new prime-time opinion show, with rotating hosts.[146]

Local news and the broadcast TV evening newscasts (which still reach a combined audience of some 22.5 million per night)[147] attract the largest

audiences in terms of numbers—and have actually shown growth in overall audience in recent years. But it is the three cable TV news networks—Fox News Channel, CNN, and MSNBC—that command the most attention from their viewers.

Cable news viewers, particularly those loyal to Fox News Channel, are older (as are many party primary voters), loyal, and engaged with what they're hearing. "On average, the cable-news audience devotes twice as much time to that news source as local and network news viewers spend on those platforms," a 2013 Pew ratings analysis found. "And the heaviest cable users are far more immersed in that coverage—watching for more than an hour a day—than the most loyal viewers of broadcast television news." Reflecting on these viewers' engagement, the researchers added, "The deeper level of viewer engagement with cable news may help to explain why cable television—despite a more limited audience—seems to have an outsized ability to influence the national debate and news agenda" as prime-time hosts on Fox News Channel and MSNBC "tend to hammer away at a somewhat narrow news agenda that magnifies the day's more polarizing and ideological issues," with the TV ratings data showing that "cable's audience is staying for a healthy helping of that content."[148]

The Internet and Democratizing Information

The Internet has been a tremendous force for democratizing information and communication, empowering individuals, building social movements, and creating "the global village" once envisioned by media guru Marshall McLuhan. And yet, as Internet scholar David Karpf put it, in exploring the role of the Internet in politics, it depends on which Internet you're talking about. "The Internet itself is a still-developing cluster of technologies, many of which can be used to countervailing political ends," he wrote. "The Internet can be used to empower dissidents, or to track and suppress them. It can be used to the benefit of disenfranchised communities or to reassert existing power dynamics. It can be used to strengthen or to erode public discourse."[149] The 2010 "Arab Spring" uprising against authoritarian regimes and a low standard of living in the Middle East, and the 2019 and 2020 protests against Chinese rule of Hong Kong, are two prominent international examples of this dichotomy. In Hong Kong student protesters wore face masks to thwart the government's facial-recognition software.

We will discuss the role of the Internet in politics, media, and social movements throughout this book.

The Goals for This Book

In this book we will examine and analyze the intersection of politics and the media—and the impact of that interaction on the following:

1. The candidates who are chosen

2. The issues that are focused on

3. The outcome of elections and public policy

4. The public's attitude toward government and media

5. The future of media and politics—and the democracy

We'll talk about the intersection and impact of politics and the media in political campaigns, policy discussions, and cultural debates—from the impact of President Trump via Twitter to debates over the role of the "media primary" and punditry in promoting candidates and issues. We'll look at the role of race and gender in American politics, and we'll study how framing language can affect attitudes and policy from immigration to health care and foreign policy. We'll examine how consolidation and cutbacks in media ownership are affecting news coverage and civic engagement—and we'll pull back the curtain on why politicians and journalists today do what they do. We'll look at the role of the Internet in politics, media, and social movements and suggested reforms in the political and media system.

You'll learn important concepts such as *framing, agenda-setting, and persuasive techniques* in media and politics, and we will apply those techniques to examining case studies and specific episodes. Our focus will be primarily on media and politics in the U.S., but we will also look at international news and media coverage of the war in Iraq, Syria, and other conflicts as well as coverage of the coronavirus pandemic and climate change. The history of developments and changes in media and politics over the past sixty years are included here to help us put today's events in context. We'll look also at popular culture—for example, the role of late-night comedy shows—and you'll have an assignment to examine the portrayals of politicians in TV series and classic movies for what they reveal about attitudes toward politicians at the time.

The goal of this book is to enable you to subject both media and politics to informed analysis that is neither pro- nor anti-media or politics but that holds both journalists and politicians accountable for their roles in the democracy.

A key element of our approach will be to analyze media and political communication thematically, in primary-source form and in case studies—tracing, for example, how climate change has been framed in the media and

how that has impacted policy. We will learn about—and apply—important scholarly research and concepts to contemporary media coverage. You'll hear targeted quotes from interviews conducted by the author as well as from some presentations with important figures in media and politics and critics of both fields. Among those are 2020 Democratic presidential candidate and Sen. Bernie Sanders, 2004 Democratic presidential candidate Howard Dean, Sen. Susan Collins, and former representatives Martin Frost and Tom Davis; TV anchors Chuck Todd, Maria Elena Salinas, Cecilia Vega, Jake Tapper, Anderson Cooper, and Christiane Amanpour; Republican and Democratic strategists, including David Winston, Ryan Williams, Ana Navarro, and Celinda Lake; civil rights leader Julian Bond; *Washington Post* executive editor Martin Baron and White House and congressional reporters, including Yamiche Alcindor of PBS and Ed O'Keefe of CBS News; experts on Internet activism; immigration activist Jose Antonio Vargas; Islamic studies scholar Akbar Ahmed; researchers and other experts on race and gender in media and politics; Pentagon officials and war correspondents; and critics of media and politics from a range of perspectives.

Media and Politics Research Tool Kit

Here at the end of this chapter is a media analysis tool kit that was developed by the author over the past several years.

The tool kit contains a guide for researching and developing your own media analysis case study and rubric for analyzing politics and the media. There is also a section at the end of this book with annotated links and descriptions of resources for your research.

This tool kit will be helpful for what is a major focus of this book: reading, examining, and analyzing media coverage and political media in primary source form—that is, related articles in print or online, TV news transcripts, websites, social media, online videos, political ads, and other pieces of political communication as they appear, in primary source form, in the media. You will then develop a thesis grounded in your research and proving it with evidence and examples while applying and incorporating scholarly research and the concepts we will be discussing here in this book. You can access and research these sources online and for free through databases at your college library.

The idea here is an approach developed in many years of teaching an interdisciplinary course in politics and the media: that it is important—and even vital—to stand back from the media environment in which we are all participants in order to examine media coverage and political communication from some distance and with fresh eyes.

There are also viewing and writing assignments at the end of each chapter to build on—and enhance—what is covered in the chapters.

How to Do Your Own Media Analysis Case Study

Our goal with this book is to be "media archaeologists," standing back from the media-politics environment we are surrounded by to examine a *variety of media*—the newscasts, the online pages, the videos, the ads, the tweets—in *primary source form* as if we are *archaeologists* examining the artifacts of a civilization other than our own. As media archaeologists, we are examining what specific artifacts and episodes in media-politics *reveal* about the underlying values, social forces, and interplay among politics, media, and culture in this not-so-ancient civilization of our own.

To develop, research, and write a case study in media politics based on content analysis, your first task is to determine what's your research question—what are you trying to answer? That will guide everything else you do. To do a media content analysis, you will need to read and watch a range of media to discern patterns and trends, develop a thesis or hypothesis, examine fully, then analyze and evaluate. You need to examine your subject in the media in primary source form—i.e., the newspaper articles, the TV newscasts, the pundit shows, the Twitter feed—to be able to develop your thesis and support it with examples.

In order to speak with authority, you need to look at more media than you will quote in your paper. It is tempting—but not enough—to look at three newscasts or a handful of stories and decide that a news outlet has been biased or unfair. If you find an example of alleged bias on a partisan website, you must read, watch, and analyze the complete video or story independently. Partisan "mediawatch" sites, on the left and right, cherry-pick from media, data, and time frames to "prove" their points. They can be a jumping-off point for how an organization may contend there has been bias—but they are not an end point.

Picking a specific episode from recent or contemporary media and politics gives you a specific time frame and a way to set your "search terms," giving you the opportunity for specificity and some depth so that your topic is not too vague—or overly broad.

You will want to be *specific in the focus* of your research and written analysis—for example, comparing coverage of an episode in two different media outlets or examining how framing and coverage of an issue has changed, over a specific time frame. You must offer *specific examples* from

media from your research that are illustrative and representative and that provide evidence for your thesis.

How do you find what you're looking for? Use this guide as well as the annotated resource pages provided at the end of the book. These materials have been developed over time for students, and they are designed to help you in researching and studying politics and the media. Most of the resources here are readily available online; some are academic databases that many colleges and universities commonly have. Consult your librarian about which your school has.

If you're looking at how a topic was covered in newspapers, setting search terms and doing several keyword searches on a database such as LexisNexis will help you gather articles one newspaper or several newspapers have done on the topic. LexisNexis also has TV news and news talk-show transcripts. If you're looking at websites, you can search on Google News or search via the website. YouTube has many famous historical and contemporary videos from politics and media. If you're looking for press releases or video material an organization took down because they later proved to be embarrassing, you might find that on a website called ShadowTV or the Internet Archive, which has extensive video cataloged. In their studies of media content, the human coders at Pew Research Center search closed-captioning text on cable and broadcast TV.[150] These and other resources are included in your media analysis tool kit.

The annotated resource pages with links includes the following items:

- Background information for understanding politics and the media

- Primary sources for analysis

- Secondary sources for scholarship on media coverage and political communication

- Sources for researching political ads

- Useful links for further understanding the topic

The rubric for research and analysis (below) can apply to all of your work, whether you are developing and researching a case study episode in media and politics, researching and analyzing a political ad campaign, or developing a more thematic paper on how the framing of a particular issue has developed and changed over time. Take a look at the case studies in this book to give you some ideas.

(Continued)

(Continued)

Ideas for Topics

One good approach is to compare how two different media outlets covered a specific episode or topic during the same time period. Another idea is to study how media coverage of a particular topic has changed and evolved. Depictions of gender and race in specific episodes or between comparative media are important topics for inquiry. You may want to look at how selected publications and platforms cover a political leader's speeches, press conferences, or policy initiative. You might trace the movement and veracity of a controversial video through the media and into politics or even a congressional investigation—and back again. You may want to look at the logos and slogans among political candidates in a major race, comparing them for their intended messaging and approach. You may want to look at how a particular social movement or opposing candidates in a race use Twitter and social media and what their key messages there are. You may want to look at the uses—and misuses—of polling in media in specific campaigns. There are many interesting and exciting possibilities.

You should research and be mindful of the historical context in which your subject was taking place. And, in all cases, you should be mindful of—and apply and cite—some of the concepts such as agenda-setting, framing, priming, visual appeals, emotional appeals, persuasive techniques, and the conventions of news-gathering and politics that you have been learning about in this book.

Your papers should include academic citations, and you should include hard copies of several of the articles, TV transcripts, or other primary materials you consulted when you turn in your paper. As mentioned in the next section, also be prepared to present your main findings, with some primary source media examples to show to your colleagues in the class.

Rubric for Research and Analysis

1. **Research:** Read, read, read—and watch, watch, watch. Read and watch across media genres and platforms on a subject you're interested in or something you've noticed.

2. **Description:** Take notes on what you see as you look at primary source media, and describe what you see. Set search terms and time frame, and look for key words or phrases. What do the media look like? What patterns emerge? If it's political communication, what do you think is the intended messaging?

3. **Development of a thesis/hypothesis:** Based on what you've seen, what's your working thesis/hypothesis about the way an episode in politics-media is covered and depicted? As said, it can be useful to pick two different outlets or two different platforms and compare or set a time frame of important plot points—events in a campaign or recent history—and see how a movement or a subject developed and the depiction of it changed over time or among media.

4. **Examination:** Examine your subject and your hypothesis fully—and consider alternative evidence. Research the historical context and public opinion at the time. Think which concepts we've discussed apply—and how.

5. **Written analysis:** Write a thoroughly researched, well-written paper that synthesizes your research and states and supports your thesis, with specific examples from the media and politics, historical context, and application of the relevant concepts we have discussed. Your paper must reflect the most important step: evaluation.

6. **Evaluation:** What does the episode or topic *reveal* about the nature and practices of news-gathering and politics, the interplay of politics, and the media or the impact of one field upon the other?

7. **Presentation:** Be prepared to share your key findings—and show some of the media you have examined—with your colleagues in class.