The Influence of the Media in Politics, Campaigns and Elections

By Laura Lane

The Influence and Relationship of the Media in Politics, Campaigns and Elections - In an age of timeliness and demand for information, the media plays a crucial role in informing the public about politics, campaigns and elections. But while the public demands information from the media, there is also an underlying cynicism in the American culture against the media and politicians for negative campaign coverage and a perceived media bias. What is often missed is the influence the government has on the media, and equally, the influence the media has on the government. Additionally, the media helps influence what issues voters should care about in elections and what criteria they should use to evaluate candidates. There is a cyclical relationship between the media, the government and the public and while the media can occasionally shape public opinion, it has a greater influence in communicating to voters what issues are important and less of an influence in convincing them what to think about those issues. The media works more effectively by placing a spotlight on certain issues they feel the public should be concerned with. "A large body of evidence now indicated that what appears in print or on the air has a substantial impact upon how citizens think and what they think about: e.g., what they cite as 'important problems'" (Page 23). The government plays a role in dictating the media's content through the media's regular use of public officials as sources in the news. Just as the government influences the media, the media can help set the political agenda by focusing on specific issues and influencing what issues the public and government should be concerned with.

THE AFFECT OF A MEDIA BIAS

There is a wide-spread belief that there is a strong political bias in the media and while that may be true to some extent, it doesn't have a significant effect on shaping the voter's views. One area that newspapers do take a stand on is in editorials, which has largely dictated by how people view certain publications. Page argues that various media outlets take distinctive stands, which can remain consistent over a period of time. He states that

"The Nation leans left, and the National Review tilts right. The Washington Post and the New York Times are socially (and, to a lesser extent, economically) liberal, while Wall Street Journal editorials thunder with conservatism; other publications line up at various points along the ideological continuum or continua" (21).

While I would argue the political stereotypes of these publications have shifted in the past ten years, the argument is still relevant that there is a wide-spread belief of a media bias. Even though editorials are clearly opinion pieces, Page argues that newspapers have a central viewpoint throughout all coverage and news stories often mirror the political views expressed in editorials. Through his studies of the 1952 Nixon and Stevenson "fund" coverage by 31 different newspapers, Page found the news stories typically have similar viewpoints as the editorial endorsements of each publication. Similarly, he found a correlation between news and editorial stories in the media's coverage of the Los Angeles riot (22). In his studies of New York Times articles on the whether or not to go to war with Iraq, Page argues that columns and editorial "came from limited kinds of sources, expressed a limited range of viewpoints, and were arranged with almost perfect symmetry on both sides of the Times's own stand" (21).

Hewitt feels that the media has a very strong bias when it comes to the coverage of the war. He says, "The assault on the war began with an assault on the American military, and it was an assault with deadly consequences" (50). One major example he gives is regarding a Newsweek article which stated that interrogators had flushed a Qur'an down the toilet and abused detainees by leading them around on a dog leash and mistreating them. The article sparked world-wide rage and response from the White House. When independent sources could not verify the incident, Newsweek finally admitted there were parts of the article were not true until pressure from the White House forced them to retract the article. When the White House felt a retraction was not enough because so much harm had already been done, the media greatly upset with the White House, due to the pressure they were putting on the publication (52-53).

Begala agrees with Hewitt that the media has a bias, but argues that it is a liberal bias. He cites the media's obsession with the Clinton and Monica Lewinsky scandal and how, "Even when Clinton was leaving office, he was hounded and pounded by the press" (199). He argues the news coverage was unfair, brutal and unethical in the way both Bill and Hillary Clinton were treated during the scandal (200). Begala also says Al Gore was treated very poorly by the press during the election, by being misquoted. Gore made major contributions during the early phases of the internet and made a comment on CNN saying he "took the initiative in creating the Internet." Begala argues this was blown out of proportion and more than a thousand articles have been written quoting Gore saying he said he "invented the internet" (202).

The people's perception that certain publications are bias can have a negative affect on journalists as a whole. While the public
demands that the press question politicians, Robinson says there is public discontent when bad news is reported due to the public's distrust in news and a "kill the messenger syndrome." At times, the public will assume all media is the same and when one publication is guilty of inaccurate or bias news, it can hurt all the media (96). But it is impossible for any political coverage to be completely free of opinion or objectivity. The media is forced to make decisions when covering politics about who to interview, what quotes and facts to select and how to interpret information. Page argues that media outlets, such as the New York Times, use the selection process to further their own policy by running articles with "colorful, value-laden adjectives and adverbs" and calling the piece an analysis (21). While it is hard to assess whether certain publications consistently have the same political stands and how they maintain those stands, Page suggests it is a combination of selective recruitment and internal expectations (23).

Compaine disagrees that journalists today have an agenda and are influenced by their publications. Despite what he notes as a brief period of muckrakers in the 20th century and the political reporting in Watergate, Compaine says that ownership no longer matters like it did when "media moguls like William Randolph Hearst, William Loeb, and Robert McCormick were attracted to the media because they each had political agendas" (22). There is a wide-spread belief that the media is becoming monopolized. Even though there are some large media outlets, there is no one media conglomerate that owns newspapers, book publishers, radio stations, cable companies, or television licenses in every major world market (21).

THE MEDIA AS A POLITICAL SPOTLIGHT

While many are afraid that a biased media will shape people's views during elections, the media is more effective in dictating what issues voters should view as important and less effective in shaping those views. Ramsden argues that although the media "might occasionally influence attitudes, they are more frequently effective as a spotlight" (66). He argues the media is effective in telling voters what issues to focus on, and less effective in telling them what to think of those issues. Since the media is practically the only way to get campaign information widely distributed, they influence what issues people should consider when evaluating a candidate and what criteria to judge them by (65).

Robinson agrees and says "while the media can play an important role in changing voters' perceptions, information, attitudes, and even behavior," their viewpoints do not drastically change and the media has more of a reinforcing role than it does in shaping viewpoints (101). The media has a strong influence on the issues the public views as important because repeated coverage of certain issues become priorities for the viewers and can affect the evaluation of candidates. One example is how Reagan's public approval rating dropped when the media began focusing on the Iran-contra affair. The new coverage dictated new criteria the public should judge Reagan by (Wood and Edwards 329). Ramsden says this is true for judging both the policy of a candidate as well as their character. He uses the example of Jimmy Carter, saying that although he had very little experience, the public widely ignored their character. He uses the example of Jimmy Carter, saying that although he had very little experience, the public widely ignored their character. He uses the example of Jimmy Carter, saying that although he had very little experience, the public widely ignored their character. He uses the example of Jimmy Carter, saying that although he had very little experience, the public widely ignored their character. He uses the example of Jimmy Carter, saying that although he had very little experience, the public widely ignored their character. He uses the example of Jimmy Carter, saying that although he had very little experience, the public widely ignored their character. He uses the example of Jimmy Carter, saying that although he had very little experience, the public widely ignored their character.

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THE MEDIA ACTING AS A SPOTLIGHT IN ELECTIONS

By spotlighting what issues the public should focus on, the media helps to dictate what issues voters should be concerned with in elections and what criteria they should use to judge politicians by. "Most of the new information voters receive over the course of a political campaign is transmitted either by news media or through social networks such as interpersonal discussion" (Mondak 62). The media can greatly influence the public by limiting coverage of certain candidates. The media has the discretion to cover only the candidates it feels are legitimate candidates and have a viable chance of winning the election. In this way, the media acts as a filter, by narrowing down candidates and sifting out lesser-known candidates and giving more coverage to the better-known. Although the public should ultimately decide on its own who they feel is a viable candidate, Ramsden notes that the newspaper editors will argue that with so many candidates to cover and with limited resources, it is impossible to cover all candidates equally (80). While Ramsden argues that the media should stray away from covering the viability of candidates, he admits it would be useless to cover candidates who do not have a reasonable amount of voter support, simply for the sake of equal coverage (80). As a solution, Ramsden says the media should cover all candidates equally so voters can get to know them all. Then after voters have been informed about the candidates, the media can look for cues about where to allocate the most coverage. (81)

Wattenberg argues media coverage practically ignores political parties and focuses instead on the candidates themselves (Wattenberg 225-226). This observation has both positive and negative implications. This tends to be a more unbiased approach, because it allows voters to become more informed about an individual candidate they are voting for, versus blindly voting for a candidate of a particular party. This could potentially cultivate a more diverse electorate. It could, however, be negative if voters focus too much on the candidates themselves and not on the issues the candidate stands for.

This could have a negative effect if voters are not voting on candidates that best represent their views on public policy. "Voters are less likely today to vote simply along party lines, and more likely to split their tickets and defect from their party's choice, if the candidate's stand on the issues or the candidate's ideology is relatively unattractive" (Robinson 97). The media can not directly dictate how voters will think, but it can influence what they should be thinking about. In an indirect way, the media sets the agenda.
People will not think about issues or events they are not informed about (Ramsden 68). It is however, important to note that not all political opinions are shaped by the media. Voters also receive information from their friends, family and co-workers. "Political discussion contributes to that information mix, with resulting influence on electoral choice" (Mondak 83).

THE MEDIA'S INFLUENCE ON CAMPAIGNING

The media can greatly effect elections by generating attention, whether it is through negative campaigning or through their choice in coverage of a candidate. "In competing for the attention of the large swath of the electorate that is uninterested, disheartened or cynical- or is at least perceived that way- politicians, interest groups and even the media often resort to negatively, demonization, polarization and at times, sensationalism" (Hamm and Mann 18). In the 1992 Ohio House race, a political banking scandal generated media attention which ultimately led to Republican Martin Hoke beating incumbent Mary Rose Oakar with 57% of the vote. Hoke campaigned nearly the entire time by attacking Oakar. In another district where there was far less media attention, Democratic incumbent Louis Stokes effortlessly won the reelection. Mondak argues that without the media attention focusing on the negative campaigning by Hoke, the incumbent might have been reelected (65).

Negative campaigning has become a staple among American politics and negative reporting can have a major impact in shaping the public's evaluation of public officials. This can be seen by the media's role in forming voter's national economic evaluation in the 1992 election. Despite positive economic conditions at the time, which appeared to favor Bush for reelection, negative reporting on the economic performance during the year affected the public perception of the economy. Hetherington argues that relentless negative reporting explained why George Bush lost the reelection despite an economy that had rebounded from a recession, which ended by March 1991, 20 months before the election (Hetherington 372).

The first spot commercial ever used in presidential campaigns was in 1952 by Dwight Eisenhower, whose ads featured him answering a series of questions (Hamm and Mann 13). Since then, campaign advertising has drastically changed. While candidates hate to admit it, negative campaigning, or "comparative advertising" as Bob Dole called it, have become the ad of choice, because they have proven to have the most influence and be the most memorable. Although, lately voters have become turned-off from all the negative campaigning and name-calling, campaign consultants know that voters are still cynical of politicians and will react to any sign of doubt. "It can be argued that the negative campaign simply responds to cynicism, even as it amplifies it" (14).

The media also influences the public's perception on the viability of a candidate. If reports say a certain candidate is ahead in an election, the public will come to accept that evaluation, which can greatly influence how voters cast their ballots. For the most part, people do not want to waste time on candidates they believe do not have a chance to win. This can be seen in Gary Hart's 1984 New Hampshire primary win. Hart convinced the media he was a viable candidate and not his opponent John Glenn. The media's favorable coverage helped seal Hart's victory (Ramsden, 67). But over-reporting the viability of a candidate can turn the coverage into a "horse race," meaning the media focuses too much on who is winning and who is ahead. This can influence voters by swaying their focus on what candidate has the best campaign style and not necessarily who has the best "platform or leadership skills" (72). Ramsden says that although the "horse race" needs to be covered, it deserves much less coverage that it currently gets, because voting based largely on viability defeats the main function of democracy, which is to elect candidates that represent the will of the people. He argues "the media should allocate its coverage in terms of policy issues first, character issues second, and viability third." (78)

MEDIA'S INFLUENCE ON GOVERNMENT

Even after the election, the media still plays a large roll in influencing the government's agenda through spotlighting issues and directing public and political concerns. Wood argues that while the media may not be a source of new ideas for the White House, it still has an affect on policymakers because "the public's familiarity with political matters is closely related to the amount and duration of attention these affairs receive in the mass media" (Wood and Edwards 328).

It can be argued that in some incidents the media can set the political agenda by covering issues the government does not want to focus on. This was evident through the media's coverage of U.S. interventions in Somalia and Bosnia and the media's pressure on the government to take action. This is an example of the media informing the public by spotlighting an issue that would otherwise be unknown. This incident caused President Clinton to say the media was "trying to force me to get America into a war" (Wood and Edwards 329). Instead of the President choosing what international affairs to engage in, the media dictated what issue should be a concern.

In another case, the media sparked political action by sending military force and humanitarian relief in response to the 1990 coverage of the starving children in Somalia, which coined the phrase the "CNN effect" (Compaine 26). "The mass media can be seen not only as a driving force behind cultural and social change but also as an index for political mobilization, both domestically and internationally" (Gerges 104).
GOVERNMENT AFFECT ON THE MEDIA

Just as the media can help to shape the political agenda, the government can equally influence the media's coverage. Page argues that the government can dictate political media coverage to a certain extent, because the media regularly uses officials as sources in news stories and they are able to express their views and set their agenda on a regular basis. The media has become dependent on using officials because of "the nature of newsgathering routines and the need for regular easy access to legitimate sources who possess valuable information" (22). The government can shape the media's agenda by providing the press with briefings, background, press releases, interviews and press conferences (Wood and Edwards 328).

Although Gerges argues that "The political process is more likely to have an influence on the news media than the news media on the political process (105)," even if the media is skeptical of the President, the President still sets the agenda by receiving constant media coverage. Whether or not the media agrees with the White House, it still influences the public through the "spotlight" affect by telling the public what issues are important. In some ways the media can be seen as an instrument for the government to propagate their agenda and political stance. While the media does have the ability to select what information they use, as Page argues, the media is limiting itself by simply passing along the view points of whatever political power is currently in control (22).

"American politics is increasingly characterized by the 'permanent campaign' in which politicians and interest group leaders engage, in the words of Hugh Heclo, 'in continuous efforts to orchestrate, amplify, and inject the presumptive voices of the American people into the formulation and management of national policy”" (Hamm and Mann 18).

THE DIFFERENT FORMS OF MEDIA

There are many different forms of media that affect the political landscape, but the two primary types of media are paid media and free media. Paid media can make or break a campaign depending on how much a candidate has to spend on television, posters, fliers, etc. "To a large extent, campaign spending is driven by the behavior of the challengers; when the challenger is well-funded, the incumbent will spend more in response” (Mondak 67). Paid media can be expensive and because voters have learned to tune-out political propaganda, free-media can be much more effective. With paid media it is not always easy to get the message heard by voters. Viewers are impatient now more than ever and political messengers must work in a 30-second commercial to break through cynical viewers who flip through channels and live in an entertainment-filled world. "They must sharpen and simplify their messages in order to be heard. And they must use the most popular entertainment medium as the conveyer of their messages" (Hamm and Mann 13). During the 1996 presidential election, Bill Clinton and Bob Dole broadcast 1,397 hours of commercials in the 75 major media markets from April up until Election Day (Hamm and Mann 15). While television reaches a mass audience, campaigns can also chose to send out targeted mail to voters who fit a certain profile or engage in political organizations (Glaser 76).

But the best media of all is free media. Bill Clinton did a remarkable job of taking advantage of free media by appealing to wide-range of voters by going on MTV during the campaign and through his famous appearance at Arsenio Hall when he played his saxophone (Hamm and Mann 16). Knowing how to take advantage of the media is essential in a campaign. John F. Kennedy helped shape the modern day model for understanding the media and going public through his relationship with the media in the 1960 campaign. Nixon on the other hand, did not have such a good relationship with the media and did not understand the importance of mass coverage. Just before Election Day, Kennedy visited northeastern states with large electoral votes and more importantly, major media outlets where he would be seen by a large audience. Nixon on the other hand, wanted to fulfill his promise of going to every state and went to Alaska. What Nixon didn’t understand was that it was more important to be seen by voters than it was to go to every state (Maltese 16).

HOW PEOPLE GET THEIR INFORMATION DURING ELECTIONS

During elections, people turn to different forms of media to get their information, depending on what information they are looking for and how involved they are in politics. Robinson found in studying the 1969 elections that there was a slight decline in newspaper and magazine use during campaigns, where television is the leading source of information (97). Although most people claimed they get most of their political information from television, it is printed media people frequently cite as the source of "specific news content" (Robinson 99-100). Mondak, on the other hand, found that by studying the 1992 Pittsburgh elections, voters turned to television for the Senate and presidential campaigns and only turned to newspapers "as substitutes for their missing local dailies" (68-69).

Glaser found that newspapers are often read more by people who are educated, informed and already interested in politics. He also said newspaper articles can inform the viewer more than television coverage can. (78). Robinson agreed that people who pay attention to the media during campaigns are normally already involved in politics (98). "Attention to the media for campaign news is mainly found among people who are already involved in political activities" (Robinson 98). Glaser argues that people can recall television reminders more than radio or newspapers. He noted a 1960 Gallop Survey that asked people "Where do you get most of
your information about what's going on in the world - from magazines, TV, radio, or newspapers (74). He says television leaves a more lasting impression than other medias (83). While much has changed since these surveys were conducted, the public is still concerned with timeliness, which I would argue is one of the leading reasons people turn away from print during elections.

I would argue that the internet has just recently begun to take the place of TV, just as TV took the place of print. People go to the internet because it is accessible and immediate. I would also argue the internet has a clear advantage over television because viewers can chose what information they are looking for and when they get it. In the age where timing is everything, viewers don't want to wait through an entire broadcast to hear the information they are looking for and they certainly don't want to wait through commercial breaks. The internet is also a great outlet for individuals or small groups to reach the masses. It is cheap, easy and available to anyone. It breaks the saying that "Freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one" (Compaine 24).

CONCLUSION

Through free media and paid media, the press is able to influence voters by telling them what issues are important at the time. While there is a wide-spread belief that they media is bias to either the right of the left, it should be less of a concern to the public because the media is largely unsuccessful in shaping opinion. The media also influences the government through the spotlight affect and discussing issues that might not have been at the top of the political agenda. The media has a very strong affect in politics, campaigns and elections by dictating what issues are relevant, what candidates will get the most coverage and what criteria they should use to evaluate candidates. Equally, the media is affected by the government, who is able to use the media as a political instrument by furthering the political views of whatever power is currently in office. While it is not absolute because outside factors also shape positions, the media, public and government has a cyclical relationship that influences one another.

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