

Mass Media: Function and Types

“Mass media” refer to the various forms of communication that reach large, widely dispersed audiences simultaneously. The function of mass media today is extensive—from keeping the public informed on government actions to helping to mold public opinion on candidates and issues.

Four types of mass media are important in the U.S. today.

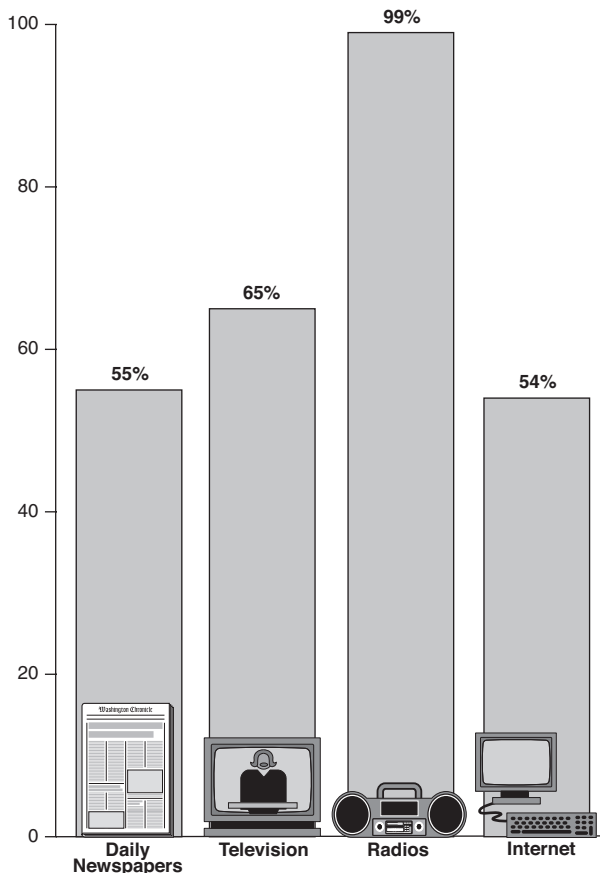
Internet

The expansion of the Internet in the 1990s revolutionized the transmission of information to U.S. households. Today, more than half of U.S. households have Internet access; this number is expected to rise.

The Internet has begun to play a large role in politics. Partisan Web sites such as MoveOn.org and the Republican National Committee site have successfully used the Internet to encourage political participation from their constituencies. Many individual candidates have used the Internet to mobilize voter support and raise campaign funds.

Distribution of Media in the U.S., 2000

(Percent of U.S. households)



Television

Since the late 1930s, television has provided information to millions of households. By the 1960s, television had replaced newspapers as people’s principal source of political information.

Radio

By the 1930s radio was exposing millions of Americans to national and international politics as never before. President Franklin D. Roosevelt was the first president to use the radio effectively in his “fireside chats” in the 1930s.

Generally, radio covers less political news than television does; however, it is still a vital source of information on government and politics.

Print

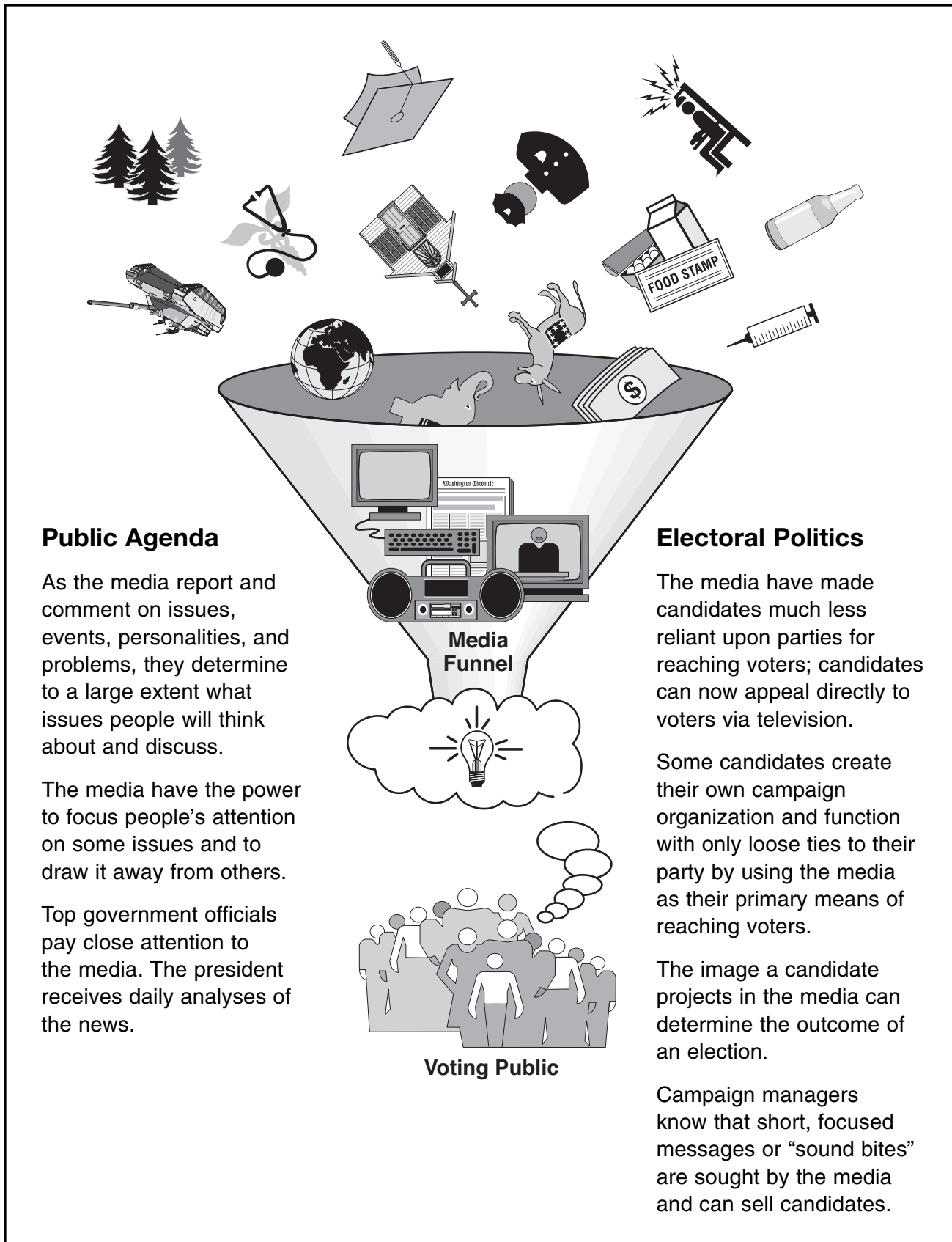
Newspapers rank second only to television in the amount of information provided on government and politics; also, they provide greater depth than television and often show different points of view. Over 95 million adults in the U.S. read the paper on average for one half hour daily.

In the mid-1800s the first political magazines, *Harpers Weekly* and the *Atlantic Monthly*, were published. Of the more than 10,000 magazines published today, most are special-interest journals or trade magazines. There are also influential news magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek*, as well as public opinion magazines like *The Nation* and *The New Republic*.

In the early days of the country, newspapers were the most vital form of mass communication. Thomas Jefferson understood their importance. In 1787, he said:

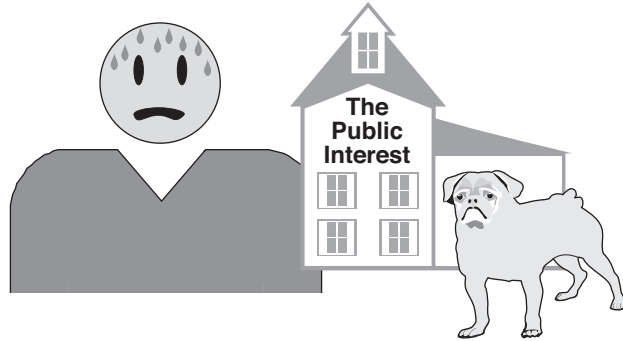
Were it left to me to decide whether you should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.

Mass Media: Impact on Politics



Mass Media: Impact on Government

U.S. government officials and members of the mass media have an uneasy relationship. They need to work together, yet they are often at odds. For instance, the media often play the “watchdog” role in uncovering corruption.



Executive Branch

The president and the media can have a mutually beneficial relationship. The president provides news for the media; the media provide a forum for the president. Nevertheless, the media often report negatively on presidential actions, resulting in a strain on the relationship. Also, each of the executive departments assigns public relations officers to deal with the press. For example, the Department of Defense employs some 1,500 press officers.



Legislative Branch

About 5,000 reporters have press credentials to cover Congress, but only about 400 cover it full-time. Most of the coverage is on individual lawmakers and is reported to newspapers in their home states. The national media tend to report on the most controversial aspects of Congress.



Judicial Branch

The public relies on the mass media to learn about Supreme Court and federal court decisions. However, the courts receive much less coverage than the president or the Congress. On average, newspapers report on less than 50% of the Supreme Court’s cases. Reporters are assigned to the Court, but the remoteness of the justices and the technicality of the law make the task of informing the public more difficult.

Press Officers’ Tools of the Trade

Press officers handle an official’s relations with the media. Here’s how they do it:

Media events

are visually interesting events that reinforce a position on some issue. For example, dedicating new school buildings and public parks links an official to educational and environmental issues.

Press releases

are prepared by government officials and released to the media at a specified time. They highlight a specific action or policy.

News briefings

are events when a government official announces a policy or decision. Reporters may ask questions. The president’s press secretary meets daily with the press to provide information on the president’s activities.

Press conferences

allow the news media to question a high-level government official.

“Background information”

is shared with the news media on an unofficial basis and attributed to unnamed sources, “a senior White House official,” for example. This allows officials to test new ideas or send messages to other policy makers.

Leaks

are the release of secret information by an anonymous government official.