CHAPTER 7

THE MASS MEDIA AND THE POLITICAL AGENDA

CHAPTER OUTLINE

I. Introduction (pp. 210-211)
   A. **High-tech politics** is a politics in which technology increasingly shapes the behavior of citizens and policymakers, as well as the political agenda itself.
   B. The **mass media** consist of television, radio, newspapers, magazines, and other means of popular communication that reach, and profoundly influence, not only the elites but also the masses.

II. The Mass Media Today (pp. 212-213)
   A. A **media event** is staged primarily for the purpose of being covered.
   B. Image making is critical to campaigning and day-to-day governing.

III. The Development of Media Politics (pp. 213-224)
   A. **Introduction**
      1. Franklin D. Roosevelt practically invented media politics, holding two **press conferences** (presidential meetings with reporters) a week.
      2. The Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal soured the press on government.
      3. **Investigative journalism** is the use of detective-like reporting methods to unearth scandals.
   B. **The Print Media**
      1. The press has a pecking order.
      2. The political content of leading magazines is slim.
   C. **The Broadcast Media**
      1. During World War II, radio went into the news business in earnest.
      2. Since the 1960s, television has had a profound impact on politics.
   D. **Government Regulation of the Broadcast Media**
      1. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) regulates communications via radio, television, telephone, cable, and satellite.
      2. The FCC regulates airwaves to prevent near-monopolies, license stations, and insure fair treatment.
   E. **From Broadcasting to Narrowcasting: The Rise of Cable News Channels**
      1. Rather than appealing to a general audience, cable news channels focus on a narrow particular interest.
      2. Many scholars feel that cable news has reduced the overall quality of political journalism.
F. The Impact of the Internet
G. Private Control of the Media
   1. Unlike many other countries, virtually all of American media outlets are in private hands, allowing freedom in journalistic content.
   2. Major metropolitan newspapers are mostly owned by chains.

IV. Reporting the News (pp. 224-230)
A. News is what is timely and different.
B. Finding News
   1. Most news organizations assign reporters to beats, specific locations where news frequently happens.
   2. Trial balloons consist of information leaked to discover the political reaction.
C. Presenting the News: as technology has enabled the media to pass along information with greater speed, news coverage has become less complete and sound bites are more common.
D. Bias in the News
   1. News reporting is not systematically biased toward a particular ideology or party.
   2. Television is biased toward stories that generate good pictures. The talking head is considered boring.

V. The News and Public Opinion (pp. 230-232)
A. Although studies show that the media do not affect how people vote, they do affect what they think about and the priorities they attach to problems.
B. People’s opinions shift with the tone of news coverage.

VI. The Media’s Agenda-Setting Function (pp. 232-233)
A. The policy agenda is “the list of subjects or problems to which government officials, and people outside of government closely associated with those officials, are paying some serious attention at any given time.”
B. Policy entrepreneurs are people who invest their political “capital” in an issue.
C. The media can be used by the poor and downtrodden as well as the elite.

VII. Understanding the Mass Media (pp. 233-235)
A. The Media and the Scope of Government
B. Individualism and the Media
C. Democracy and the Media

VIII. Summary (pp. 235-236)
LEARNING OBJECTIVES

*After studying Chapter 7, you should be able to:*

1. Describe the characteristics of the mass media today.
2. Explain the development of the print and broadcast media from a historical perspective.
3. Understand how news is found and reported by the media.
4. Describe how the news media affect public opinion.
5. Discuss what is meant by the concepts of policy agenda and policy entrepreneur and the media’s importance to them.
6. Understand how the media affect the scope of government and the democratic process.

*The following exercises will help you meet these objectives:*

Objective 1: Describe the characteristics of the mass media today.

1. Explain the purpose of a media event.

2. List the seven principles of news management as practiced in the Reagan White House.
   1. 
   2. 
   3. 
   4. 
   5. 
   6. 
   7.
Objective 2: Explain the development of the print media and the broadcast media from a historical perspective.

1. Explain two media techniques used most effectively by President Franklin Roosevelt.
   1. 
   2. 

2. What is meant by investigative journalism?

3. Describe the “pecking order” of the American press.

4. Explain how television affected the political career of Richard Nixon.

5. What effect did television have on the war in Vietnam?

6. Explain the three ways in which the Federal Communications Commission has regulated the airwaves.
   1. 
   2. 
   3. 

7. What impact has cable TV had on news reporting?
8. List four findings of the Columbia University’s Project for Excellence in Journalism on cable news programming.

1. 

2. 

3. 

4. 

9. What makes news reporting on the Internet particularly different from news reporting on television?

10. Explain two consequences of private control of the media in the United States.

1. 

2. 

Objective 3: Understand how news is found and reported by the media.

1. Where does most news come from?

2. What is meant by a “sound bite” and what does it tell us about news coverage?

3. Explain how the news media tend to be biased.

Objective 4: Describe how the news media affect public opinion.

1. In the experiments by Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder, what effect did manipulating TV stories have on viewers?
2. Give examples of how the media have had an effect on how the public evaluates specific events.

Objective 5: Discuss what is meant by the concepts of policy agenda and policy entrepreneur, and the media’s importance to them.

1. Define the term “policy agenda.”

2. List five items in the policy entrepreneurs’ “arsenal of weapons.”
   1. 
   2. 
   3. 
   4. 
   5. 

Objective 6: Understand how the media affect the scope of government and the democratic process.

1. How do the media act as a “watchdog”? 

2. What is the difference between the “information society” and the “informed society”?

KEY TERMS

Identify and describe:

high-tech politics
mass media

media event

press conferences

investigative journalism

print media

broadcast media

narrowcasting

chains

beats

trial balloons

sound bites
talking head

policy agenda

policy entrepreneurs

*Compare and contrast:* 
high-tech politics and mass media

media events and press conferences

print media and broadcast media

sound bites and talking head

policy agenda and policy entrepreneur

*Name that term:*

1. It reaches the elite as well as the masses.

2. These are staged primarily for the purpose of being covered.
3. This tends to pit reporters against political leaders.

4. These control newspapers with most of the nation’s circulation.

5. The primary mission of cable and Internet news.

6. Specific locations from where news frequently emanates.

7. Information leaked to see what the political reaction would be.

USING YOUR UNDERSTANDING

1. Choose one of the three major networks, CBS, NBC, or ABC, and watch the evening news every day for a week. While watching, write down the topic of each news story, the amount of time spent on the story, and an assessment of the story’s content and the issues it raises. Read a daily newspaper (preferably the New York Times or another major paper) for the same days. Compare the television and newspaper coverage of the same news stories. Analyze the differences between these media in terms of how the stories were presented, depth of coverage, and issue orientation. Evaluate how the print media and the broadcast media might differ in their influence on public opinion.

2. Based on your understanding of the role of the media in the agenda-building process, critique a news item or article that concerns a policy issue. Your critique should begin by asking how well the item identified the policy issue, the policy entrepreneurs, and people in government concerned about the issue. Assess the news item as both a source of information and a source of influence on your perceptions of politics, government, and policy. Consider how policymakers might use the news item as well. Put yourself in the position of the reporter and consider how the story might have been improved. In light of your critique, discuss your impressions of the media as unofficial but important sources of influence on public opinion and the policy agenda.
REVIEW QUESTIONS

Check ☑ the correct answer:

1. The American political system has entered a new period of high-tech politics.
   ☐ True
   ☐ False

2. Television, radio, newspapers, and other means of popular communication are called
   ☐ a. chains.
   ☐ b. high-tech politics.
   ☐ c. mass media.
   ☐ d. public relations.

3. The influence of the mass media is limited to the elites in the United States.
   ☐ True
   ☐ False

4. Media events are spontaneous circumstances that get the media’s attention.
   ☐ True
   ☐ False

5. A president who was particularly successful in playing to the media was
   ☐ b. Ronald Reagan.
   ☐ c. Richard Nixon.

6. News management in the Reagan White House operated on each of the following principles EXCEPT
   ☐ a. staying on the offensive.
   ☐ b. controlling the flow of information.
   ☐ c. speaking in one voice.
   ☐ d. spontaneity.

7. Today, for a president to ignore the power of image and the media would be perilous.
   ☐ True
   ☐ False
8. (bonus) Who said “The President of the United States will not stand and be questioned like a chicken thief by men whose names he does not even know”?
   □ a. Herbert Hoover
   □ b. Franklin D. Roosevelt
   □ c. Lyndon Johnson
   □ d. Richard Nixon

9. The president who held numerous press conferences and practically created media politics was
   □ a. Herbert Hoover.
   □ b. Franklin Roosevelt.
   □ c. John F. Kennedy.
   □ d. Ronald Reagan.

10. Prior to the 1960s, the relationship between politicians and the press was one of skepticism and distrust.
    □ True
    □ False

11. The press soured on government as a result of the events of the
    □ a. Vietnam War.
    □ b. Watergate scandal.
    □ c. Korean War.
    □ d. both a. and b.

12. News coverage of presidential candidates has become increasingly
    □ a. focused on the issues.
    □ b. limited.
    □ c. favorable.
    □ d. less favorable.

13. Ever since the rise of TV news, newspaper circulation rates have been declining.
    □ True
    □ False

14. (bonus) Who said “four hostile newspapers are more to be feared than a thousand bayonets”?
    □ a. Richard Nixon
    □ b. Lyndon Johnson
    □ c. Walter Cronkite
    □ d. Napoleon
15. Gradually, the broadcast media have replaced the print media as our principal source of news and information.
   □ True
   □ False

16. The political career of Richard Nixon was made and unmade by television.
   □ True
   □ False

17. Richard Nixon’s experiences during the 1960 presidential campaign illustrate the
   □ a. power of television in American politics.
   □ b. insignificance of presidential debates.
   □ c. greater importance of print media.
   □ d. friendly relationship between the media and political candidates.

18. Using the broadcast media, Lyndon Johnson was successful in persuading the public that America was winning the war in Vietnam.
   □ True
   □ False

19. Which of the following statements is TRUE?
   □ a. Newspapers are the main source of news for Americans.
   □ b. Most of the news originates from correspondents.
   □ c. In-depth analyses of policy issues are common in the media.
   □ d. Cable news and the Internet have supplanted the nightly news shows.

20. The use of the airwaves is regulated by the
   □ a. states.
   □ d. Federal Broadcasting System.

21. News on cable TV and the Internet
   □ a. is not available to most people.
   □ b. focuses on a narrow particular interest.
   □ c. appeals to a general audience.
   □ d. is rarely used by most young adults.
22. Which of the following statements regarding the impact of the Internet is FALSE?

☐ a. The impact of the Internet on politics has thus far been revolutionary.
☐ b. Most Americans utilize the Internet widely for detailed information on politics.
☐ c. The Internet is limited to sound bites and summaries of political events.
☐ d. The Internet has not been found to be useful for political campaigns.

23. Newspaper chains

☐ a. are organizations loosely linked by the wire services.
☐ b. are controlled by conglomerates that often control broadcast media as well.
☐ c. began to disappear with the advent of television.
☐ d. are local papers owned by fearless local editors.

24. The news media avoid odd events in favor of reporting only objective conditions.

☐ True
☐ False

25. The bottom line that shapes how journalists define news, where they get news, and how they present news is

☐ a. objectivity.
☐ b. truth.
☐ c. profits.
☐ d. comprehensiveness.

26. Most news organizations assign their best reporters to particular beats.

☐ True
☐ False

27. Trial balloons are used by politicians to

☐ a. put issues on the policy agenda.
☐ b. see their constituents.
☐ c. test political reactions.
☐ d. take public polls.

28. If you had to pick a single word to describe news coverage by the print and broadcast media, it would be

☐ a. comprehensive.
☐ b. biased.
☐ c. misleading.
☐ d. superficial.
29. Which of the following statements is FALSE?
   □ a. Television analysis of news events rarely lasts more than a minute.
   □ b. In-depth attention to the issues is given only during presidential campaigns.
   □ c. Newspapers rarely reprint the entire text of important political speeches.
   □ d. Snappy sound bites of 10 seconds or less are more common than full speeches on television.

30. Studies on bias in the news have found that the news media tend to
   □ a. favor the Democratic Party.
   □ b. be politically conservative.
   □ c. be politically neutral.
   □ d. favor the Republican Party.

31. Which of the following statements is FALSE?
   □ a. Most reporters strongly believe in journalistic objectivity.
   □ b. Most news stories are presented in a “point/counterpoint” format.
   □ c. The news media do not want to lose their audience by appearing biased.
   □ d. Most studies have shown that the media are systematically biased toward a conservative ideology.

32. The news media tend to do all of the following EXCEPT
   □ a. mirror reality.
   □ b. show more bad news than good news.
   □ c. focus on stories that generate good pictures.
   □ d. overemphasize dramatic events.

33. A “talking head” is a media term referring to a shot of a person’s face talking directly to the camera.
   □ True
   □ False

34. To which of the following news stories did Americans pay closest attention?
   □ a. arrest of O.J. Simpson
   □ b. terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon
   □ c. 2000 presidential election outcome
   □ d. congressional debate over NAFTA

35. Studies have shown that the news media
   □ a. have only a marginal effect on public opinion.
   □ b. directly affect how people vote.
   □ c. affect what Americans think about.
   □ d. can conceal problems that actually exist.
36. By increasing public attention to specific problems, television news can influence the criteria by which the public evaluates political leaders.

☐ True
☐ False

37. Research indicates that public opinions remain constant even when news coverage changes.

☐ True
☐ False

38. Issues on the policy agenda are always defined by government officials, but not by people outside of government.

☐ True
☐ False

39. Which of the following characteristics is NOT common among policy entrepreneurs?

☐ a. commitment to a single policy issue
☐ b. investment of personal political capital
☐ c. avoidance of the media
☐ d. concern about government’s priorities

40. Which of the following people would NOT qualify to be a policy entrepreneur?

☐ a. an elected official
☐ b. an interest group leader
☐ c. an academic researcher
☐ d. none of the above would qualify to be a policy entrepreneur

41. The media act as key linkage institutions between the people and the policymakers, having a profound impact on the policy agenda.

☐ True
☐ False

42. The watchdog function of the media

☐ a. contributes to the growth of government.
☐ b. can be characterized as reformist.
☐ c. has a liberal political orientation.
☐ d. is no longer a central concern of the media.

43. When the media focus on injustice in society, they inevitably help keep government small.

☐ True
☐ False
44. The American institutional agenda has changed dramatically because television finds it easier to focus on groups than on individuals.
   □ True  
   □ False

45. Which of the following statements is TRUE?
   □ a. The media are at their best when reporting stories about complex, high-tech issues.
   □ b. The amount of information available through the news media has decreased.
   □ c. The rise of the information society has brought about a rise in the informed society.
   □ d. The media attempts to appeal to the maximum number of people.

46. The news media’s defense for being superficial is to say that this is what the people want.
   □ True  
   □ False

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Using examples from presidential politics, explain why image and the use of the media are so important in the American political system.

2. Explain the historical development of the print and broadcast media in the United States. Use examples to illustrate your answer.

3. How have cable news channels and the Internet changed the nature of the mass media and news reporting? Give examples to illustrate your answer.

4. How does television define what is newsworthy? Explain where television finds its news stories and how they are presented to the American public.

5. Describe how the media shape public opinion. What are the consequences of the media’s influence on public opinion?

6. What is the policy agenda? Who are the policy entrepreneurs and how do they utilize the media to get their issues on the policy agenda?

7. Explain how the news media affect the scope of government and American individualism. How have they helped and hindered the growth of democracy in the United States?