

5.12 The Media

Explain the media's role as a linkage institution.

When we talk about the media we are talking about the means of mass communication. We are talking about the way we receive the news. **The various forms of media provide citizens with political information and influence the ways in which they participate politically.** The media is an example of an important linkage institution. Media links the public and its elected officials. The media you and I now use to obtain our news is vastly different, even from a few years ago, its role, however, is still fundamentally important to a healthy democracy.

Freedom of the press, one of our most sacred rights, is guaranteed in the First Amendment. Famed newspaper publisher Joseph Pulitzer underscored the reason for such reverence best. He wrote:

“Our Republic and its press will rise and fall together. An able, disinterested, public spirited press, with trained intelligence to know the right and courage to do it can preserve that public virtue without which popular government is a sham and mockery. A cynical, mercenary, demagogic press will produce in time a people as base as itself. The power to mold the future of the republic will be in the hands of the journalists of future generations.”

And these hands, once reserved for trained journalists using print media, have now come to include anyone with a phone or Internet connection. Whereas media once was reserved for newspapers, radio and television today media has grown increasingly digital, social and mobile. There are many different formats, platforms and devices that deliver news. Media consultants tell us that we expect our news to be “portable, personalized and participatory.”

Despite all of these changes, it is not uncommon for every day common Americans to hold the media in contempt. The American polity can often be heard saying – “Blame the media.” Vast majorities of citizens believe news sources are biased in their coverage. The relationship between journalists and politicians as well is a love-hate relationship. Politicians love journalists when their work assists in building positive public opinion. No modern campaign can be successful without positive coverage in the press. Yet the love does not last long. Journalists love to expose faults. Soon into any elective official's term journalists begin to expose apparent weaknesses.

These revolutionary changes have not affected the basic roles played by the media in today's political arena. We expect fair and honest reporting, investigative journalism,

election coverage and political commentary. Whether it was two hundred years ago or today our independent media has played and continues to play the following roles:

GATEKEEPER. The media serves as gatekeeper. The emphasis played by a headline or lead story push public discourse. What we talk about everyday is in no small way a by-product of the national and local media coverage. It can be said that mainstream media is an agenda setter.

SCOREKEEPER. The media is characterized by horse-race journalism. Our cultural attention deficit has impacted the way we learn about the news. Media is less likely to cover stories in depth. Rather they take short cuts by simply telling us who the winners and losers are. Analysis may be wanting but we know more quickly the score of our most current campaigns.

WATCHDOG. This role has grown to be the single most important function of the media today. When serving as our watchdog, we count on the media to expose political scandals. The media serves in this role the important function of a check on our elected officials. Today's media can be described as a junkyard dog. The most salacious of stories now gain the greatest audience. Muckraking has always been a national pastime.

Media plays an important role in providing citizens with political information, including news events, investigative journalism, elections coverage, and political commentary. Though there have been many changes in how media delivers political information, it continues to link every day citizens to a government designed to be responsive to the will of the people.

