



# Politics in the Media: A Search for Answers



Margaret Smetana  
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As Americans we take pride in our liberating government. But, it is essential to ask how much we, the general public, know about our democracy. Because of the representative structure of our government, it is in our best interest to remain as knowledgeable as possible about political affairs so that we can play an active role in our democracy by voting for candidates and issues. The media, which includes print, television, and the internet, is our primary link to political events and issues. (For the purposes of this essay only print and television will be considered.) Therefore, in order to assess the success of our democracy it is necessary to assess the soundness of our media. We are lucky enough to have a media, in theory, free from government influences because of our rights to freedom of press and freedom of speech, but we are still subject to the media's interpretation and presentation of politics, as is the danger when depending on any source for information. So, we must address how the media informs us; how successful it is at doing so; and how we should respond to it.

This essay will show, unfortunately, that our democracy is not as healthy as it potentially could be because of television and print's inadequate coverage of politics and the public's resultant frustration and lack of knowledge. The reason this occurs is not because the media is trying to restrict our role in the government, but because it has other agendas to consider, such as producing maximum profits. Also, the media can take its obligatory role, often referred to as the "fourth estate," to an extreme. John McManus, a former newspaper reporter and current professor at Santa Clara University researching the social responsibility of news media, specifically uses this term in his book *Market-Driven Journalism: Let the Citizen Beware?* to explain the media's ideal role as the fourth branch of the government. The media is meant to participate in our system of checks and balances and check the government to ensure that it does not withhold too much power from the people. However, this can pose a problem if the media tries too hard to keep a check on the government and ends up transcending its role as the fourth estate and becoming cynical of the government. These market-driven characteristics and overzealous tendencies are conveyed in the media's choice and presentation of language. The general frustration and lack of knowledge that directly results from this kind of political coverage can cause Americans to give up on politics, cease to vote, and disconnect themselves from the entire system. Consequently, the concern is that the peoples' voice will lose its authority in the government and therefore weaken our democracy. To keep this from happening, we must recognize how the media affects us and then understand how we can keep this deterioration from occurring.

Tom Patterson, a professor of political science at Syracuse University who focuses on the media's role in elections, discusses in his book *Out of Order* the frustration many Americans experience with politics and its leaders as a result of the media's coverage. For example, he states that "opinion polls in recent elections have revealed a people disgruntled with the electoral process and discouraged with their choices" (21). The opportunity to choose between more than one popular candidate in government elections is integral to our electoral process, so it is worrisome when Patterson suggests that voters are unhappy with this aspect of the process.

Consequently, the fault in why Americans are not satisfied with the presentation of politics lies either with the political leaders or with the media, whose job it is to portray them. While political figures are not free from blame, it is hard to know how culpable they are if the media presents us with a skewed interpretation of them and their policies. Patterson argues that the media has failed because the majority of the media's political coverage is negative, which would explain his example mentioned earlier. While conducting his studies Patterson compared the amount of "good news," coverage with "three times as much positive as negative information about the principal candidate involved," and the amount of "bad news," coverage with "three times as much negative as positive information," in news stories (Patterson 7). One study presented by Patterson indicates that in the 1992 election "Bill Clinton, George Bush, and Ross Perot each received more bad press than good (63 percent, 69 percent, and 54 percent, respectively) on network evening newscasts during the general election" (6). Whether the candidates deserved this negative coverage is debatable, but regardless these newscasts are what viewers used, solely or partially, to form their opinions on the candidates. After watching predominantly negative news coverage, it is not surprising that Patterson found many voters unhappy with their candidate choices.

John McManus would frame Patterson's findings in terms of how well the media is implementing "normative journalism," which it is expected to provide as its role in our democracy. Normative journalism is defined "as information about current issues and events designed to provide the greatest increase in understanding for the largest number of citizens that the resources of the media firm permit" (McManus 184). It still requires the media to interpret the news for us, but we expect it to do so in a manner that is as objective as possible. Patterson describes the ideal role of the media as a "watch dog," which requires the media to investigate political figures and events and present its findings with as little bias as possible so that the public is free to form its own opinions (24). The "watch dog" role relates to that of the "fourth estate" by similarly requiring the media to keep a check on the government and help the people "to meet their routine civic obligations- electing scores of local, state, and national officials, and deciding referenda and bond issues" (McManus 183). However, based on the evidence that Patterson gives, the media is stepping out of its "watch dog" role and is attacking politics; it is becoming overly concerned with keeping the people skeptical of the government.

A reasonable argument to pose is that the media's role is not to always praise politicians but to allow the public to be skeptical and to question its government. However, there is a difference between skepticism and cynicism. Skepticism implies active questioning while cynicism implies a soured perception and a resultant lack of interest. The media can take this role to an extreme though, as examples will show, and cause the public to lose faith in politics. By doing this the media is not presenting normative journalism, and the public is becoming cynical, not informed.

To judge whether or not the public is informed we need a means for measuring its knowledge. Two other media analysts, S.H. Chaffee from Stanford University and S.F. Kanihan from the University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, write in their essay "Learning about Politics for the Mass Media" that the two ways to measure political knowledge are "accurate understanding of 'issue differences' between the major political parties, or their candidates" and "knowledge of current events" (422). If, as Patterson suggests, the media's news coverage is predominantly negative, especially as it was during the 1992 presidential election when 93 percent of the news covering the federal government was negative, the public's political knowledge is not going to be high by the former measurements (Patterson 18). People will assume the invalidity of the candidates' proposals instead of focusing on their content.

The media's negative coverage is obvious in one of Patterson's examples, a report by "CBS Evening News" on September 25, 1992 in response to a challenge that Clinton made on Bush's economic plan. Instead of an informative report on how Clinton's and Bush's economic plans differ, the report emphasized specific statistics and statements given by Clinton to diminish his credibility. For example, the reporter, Engberg, focused on Clinton's indecisive conclusion on the North American Free Trade Agreement because Clinton had claimed that it was "a very long and complex argument" (Patterson 6). Engberg pounced on this statement pronouncing, "Time out! Clinton has a reputation as a committed policy wonk who soaks up details like a sponge, but on an issue which is likely to cost him votes no matter what sides he takes, the onetime Rhodes scholar is a conveniently slow learner" (Patterson 6). Clearly this is a biased attack on Clinton and possibly an unjustified one, because, Patterson later comments, that Clinton "was simply telling the truth. NAFTA is 1,078 pages in length...There is probably not a single policy expert in Washington who understands all aspects of NAFTA" (16). So besides the reporter's name-calling, his assertion was hardly rational. This is one case in which the media emphasizes language in a certain way to skew the public's interpretation of the information.

An even more powerful force in the media than overly critical political coverage is that of "market journalism," described by McManus as "information about current issues and events designed to serve the profit-maximizing interest of the firm, often—but not always—at the expense of the public's need to understand its environment" (184). The media is equally, or more so, driven by the force of the market to make a profit, instead of focusing solely on fulfilling its role of informing the public. To make money news departments "must create content that

attracts more than those who consume news primarily for information” (McManus 184). Because, as Chaffee and Kanihan explain, “those people who are searching for information are more likely to look to newspapers as a reliable source of information” (426). So, it is television, “a passively used medium,” that is most vulnerable to manipulation; it must use news to capture the attention of those who may not be as interested in politics (Chaffee and Kanihan 425). McManus explains that the media can do this by making the information it presents exciting; “To attract such consumers, content must be entertaining; such as emotionally arousing, unusual, about celebrities, visually compelling, and so forth” (184). Many Americans have spent so much time watching sitcoms and dramas that their expectation for television is to entertain them, and if it does not, many will not find it worth watching. Newspapers must also adopt similar tactics used in television to appeal to the same interests if they want to maintain their own market. The two mediums need to attract consumers to be competitive, so they implement market journalism, which includes more dramatic language, associates language with visual images, or focuses less on language all together and more on visual images.

By broadcasting political stories that are more entertaining than informative, news departments are giving viewers the impression that these are the stories that are most important. Unfortunately then, the public that depends largely on television for its information, which Chaffee and Kanihan say most commonly refers to young people, immigrants, and members of low socioeconomic classes, will not have the knowledge of what is most important for forming opinions on politics, such as policy issues. Instead they will know about scandals and personal characteristics of political figures. To exemplify this point consider the previous and the current presidential terms. I remember a scandal ridden Clinton administration and link a botched election to Bush’s presidency. Obviously there is much more depth to these two administrations, but for most of my high school career I did not follow politics or take political leaders seriously because I was disillusioned by stories like these that dominated the news. If these are some of the most vivid characteristics that come to my mind, and I am a member of the newest voting contingent, it seems that this should be a significant worry. This example shows how pertinent issues can be covered up by stories that have little to do with political policies.

However, some may argue that our president’s personal life and true character should be relevant in our view of politics. For example many people did not want a president like Clinton, who was involved in sexual scandals. Others criticized and discarded Bush in the most recent election because he was accused of having a low level of intelligence despite his graduation from Yale. Although I admit that I was also influenced by these stories, this does not justify the media’s presentation of them. The time that was spent airing the Monica Lewinsky scandal and mocking Bush could have been spent informing the public of national or international political events or the platforms of the presidential candidates.

While McManus and Patterson impose very strong feelings about the manipulative power of the

media, especially television, in regard to politics, Chaffee and Kanihan venture to conclude that television is a positive source of information because it “is the key ‘bridging’ medium of political communication for immigrant socialization, much as it is for adolescent socialization to politics” (426). They describe television in this way because it is the most important source of information for immigrants and young people; it is a bridge between them and societal issues. While it is true that television is a source of information, all of the previous claims make clear the dangers that can result from relying too heavily on television for information. So, there is a danger that these groups may be knowledgeable in aspects of political leaders’ characters and intelligence but not in the most important aspects of politics, such as policy issues, which are necessary to understand in order to be a positive factor in our government.

The extreme alternative that would seem to remedy the concerns of this essay is a media unfettered by journalists’ interpretations and market-driven motives. However, eliminating the media’s political interpretations would not necessarily leave us any more informed. An example of this would be airing a political debate with only the most objective newscast before or afterwards. While this may be helpful for those people who are familiar with the candidates and their platforms, others who do not have a foundation of political knowledge will learn little. As a result, a frustration with politics would still exist, reinforcing the worry that the media cannot possibly work to benefit our country and our democracy alone.

Considering that a major aspect of our democracy is our capitalist economy, it is unrealistic to think that the media will change due to the inherent drive in our society to increase one’s profit and win consumers. The public wants journalists to interpret the news for them and make it entertaining; therefore, the media reacts to the consumers’ demands. The only way the news would present information differently is if consumers demanded more objective coverage of strictly political policy-based news. However, the chances of this happening are slim, because dramatic coverage of politics, while not the most informative, is the most popular amongst the majority of people. So clearly we cannot expect television and newspapers to ignore capitalism, but we can ask that they balance their pursuit to make money with their obligation to inform us, even if this entails informing and entertaining us simultaneously.

We must strongly advocate a change in the media, specifically one that would make objective information more available, but since we cannot count on the media to change its political coverage, the public must take the initiative and change how it processes the news. Although the media has the potential to interpret politics for us and steer us away from participating to the full extent in our democracy, if we are aware of how the media is able to manipulate language and of the motives behind its news coverage, we will be more apt to critically interpret political coverage. Our society must then ensure that its citizens have a strong foundation in basic politics so that they are capable of making such inferences. Also by searching for political information in multiple sources rather than relying on one medium, we will encounter and be able to compare

different interpretations of our government's leaders and affairs. If we commit ourselves to these actions we will be more likely to form educated and reasoned opinions and stances that will keep our voices alive in our democracy.

We must take responsibility for our knowledge but also keep our expectations for the media high. McManus leaves us with a metaphor explaining how the public and the media must depend on one another to maintain a healthy democracy:

"In democratic theory, news media are supposed to act as society's headlights. As we travel through time, they illuminate what's before us. If they work properly—and we don't fall asleep at the wheel—society may not only avoid driving off a cliff, it may avoid dead ends and steer around some pitfalls. Good journalism can't smooth the path into the future, but it can help us find less bumpy routes. (xi)"

He presents how the relationship between the media can realistically function; both society and the media have specific expectations to meet. But notice that we, society, are in the driver's seat; therefore, we must recognize this position and embrace it. We can blame our insufficient political knowledge or our political frustration on the media to the same extent that we can blame a car crash on a broken headlight. While the media or the headlights may hinder our abilities, we are still in control.

### **Works Cited**

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McManus, John H. *Market-Driven Journalism: Let the Citizen Beware?* Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1994.

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### **Questions for Understanding**

1. What does Smetana suggest is the ultimate motive of the media? What *should* be the media's motivation? (Watch for "market journalism" later in the article as well.)
2. Explain how McManus likened the media to the "fourth branch of government". What can be the problems with this type of approach by the media?
3. How is the media to blame for voters disheartenedness (!) of our political leaders?
4. Where would you place the media at large on a continuum consisting of attacking the government -> watch dog -> objective presentation of information?
5. What is the difference between skepticism and cynicism?
6. Was the reporter who attacked President Clinton out of order or just doing his job?
7. Should politicians be permitted to have a "personal life"?
8. What are some of the positive aspects of the role of the media in politics?

