

# **Making Sense of Media and Politics**

Five Principles in Political Communication

**Gadi Wolfsfeld**

 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
NEW YORK AND LONDON

© 2011

## 5 The Media Get You When You're Not Paying Attention

I want to give you two people to think about. Let's call them Sam and Mary. Assume that they are both about fifty years old and have similar levels of education. It is October 2008 and both are sitting at home watching television and thinking about the presidential election that is one month away. While both stories below are fictional, decide which scenario is most realistic.

Sam is fifty years old and has almost always voted Republican because he feels that the Democrats are too wishy-washy when it comes to the international matters. He also believes that the Democrats are soft on crime. He did vote for Bill Clinton in 1992 because he liked the guy and felt that George H. W. Bush (the first one) was one of the reasons the economy was in such bad shape. He intends to vote for McCain, not because he sees anything particularly wrong with Obama but mostly because he feels that McCain is the better candidate. Sam is sitting in his living room watching American Idol (although he'd never admit it to his friends) when a commercial comes on for Obama. The commercial claims that the only way to lower taxes for the middle class is to raise taxes for the rich. He says to himself: "Hey, I like that. I've been backing the wrong guy. I'm going to vote for Obama."

Mary likes Obama. She voted for Hillary Clinton in the Democratic primary but unlike some of her friends never became particularly angry at Obama about what happened during the primaries ("that's just politics"). She's sitting at home watching the news and a story comes on saying that Obama wants to have negotiations with Iran, and the item includes a slew of people who are arguing that such a move would be a huge mistake. "There they go again," she says to herself, "Trying to find something bad to say about Obama." She decided that the news was just annoying her, so she switched the channel and started watching American Idol.

If you said the second story was more believable, you're right. Most people who follow the news are not persuaded by a single advertisement or news story or even a dozen. The majority of voters develop their political loyalties long before the election campaign even starts. So why do the candidates put so much effort

to get into the news and spend millions of dollars on ads if the media do not have an effect?

The news media *do* have an influence on the way people think about politics and not only during elections. But just how and when they have an influence is more complicated than many think. Researchers in the fields of communication, political science, and social psychology have been trying to get a handle on this question for decades. In fact, discussions about the effectiveness of persuasive communication go back even further to Aristotle's *Rhetoric* in which he wrote about the different ways a speaker can convince people.<sup>1</sup>

This topic is known in communication research as the question of "effects." You'd think after all this time studying it we would have a definitive answer about how people are affected by the media. But people are complicated, and it turns out that different audiences respond in their own ways to different types of messages coming from diverse channels in varying types of political circumstances. This notion also came up when discussing the relationship between cynical news and people's lack of political trust. It is because of all these differences among people, content, media, and situations that it is impossible to come up with a simple answer about how political news and advertising affects "people." Incidentally, if we did come up with a final answer to this question, many researchers would be out of a job.

Why is it so complicated? Consider the following situation. In the now famous television interview with Charlie Gibson, Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin claimed that the fact that "you can actually see Russia from land here in Alaska" provided her with a better understanding of that country's actions.<sup>2</sup> The news media made a huge deal about it, and every comedian in the world made fun of it. The comment itself as well as the *Saturday Night Live* skit was seen on YouTube and other sites by a huge audience. In short, everybody who pays attention to the world (and some who don't) heard about it. Assume for the sake of argument that at least some people had less respect for Palin after hearing that story, and for some it meant they were less likely to vote for the McCain-Palin ticket. Can such a change be attributed to the media?

The first problem we have is how to separate the influence of the act itself (Palin saying something foolish) from the coverage of what happened (the feeding frenzy that ensued). Even if a survey showed that people lost respect for Palin, we still don't know what really *caused* the change: the foolish remark, the coverage of the remark, or both. The one thing that might help would be a study in which we compared the opinions of those who watched and read about the segment and compared them with those who barely noticed it. But even then how would we know that those who already had a predisposition to dislike Palin were the ones who were more likely to watch and remember the story? You begin to see why the issue of media effects is so complicated.

So what do we do know about the effects of the media on political thinking and behavior? Three types of effects that are prominent in the field of communication: framing, agenda setting, and priming. *Framing* is by now a familiar term that refers to an interpretive theme used by political activists to promote their case

and by journalists to tell a coherent story. But here we are interested in finding out how much citizens adopt the interpretive frames that are being suggested by the media. *Agenda setting* has to do with the ability of the media to set people's political priorities. In other words, it has to do with the ability of the media to influence which topics people will think about in a given time and place. The third effect, *priming*, is one of the most interesting effects researchers have discovered. It goes one step further than agenda setting by saying that because the media can influence what to think about (e.g., the economy), they also have an effect on what types of *considerations* (e.g., economic) we use when thinking about particular political candidates and issues.

There are two other, more general, media effects that will be discussed in this chapter: learning and persuasion. The question of whether people learn from the media gets far less attention in the research than other effects but it is no less important. It is assumed that if people follow the news, they will be better informed, and this should make them better citizens. So the major research questions being asked in this field is how much do people actually learn from the news and which kinds of people are most likely to learn. Questions about learning are not, however, restricted to questions about news. People can also learn from other types of political communication such as political advertisements.

There is also quite a bit of research on how easily people can be persuaded by media content. There are many people who have spent their entire lives searching for an answer to this question, especially people involved in advertising. It turns out, however, that convincing people about political issues is far more difficult than convincing them to buy commercial products. Despite this, attempts at political persuasion are sometimes effective especially on certain types of citizens.

The theme that connects all of these effects is stated in our fifth principle: *The most important effects of the news media on citizens tend to be unintentional and unnoticed.* The fact that media effects are unintentional refers to the fact that in most cases journalists are not consciously attempting to influence the way people think about politics. As emphasized throughout this book, their primary goal is to produce interesting and culturally acceptable stories that draw in an audience. The fact that these stories can then have an impact on their audience is best seen as an unintentional byproduct. The idea that the most important effects are unnoticed suggests that when people are aware that someone is trying to persuade them they are less likely to be persuaded. But in many cases, they can be influenced by the media without realizing it. This is one of the things that makes this field so fascinating.

### **Framing—Here's a Good Way to Think about This**

Recall the discussion about framing in Chapter 3. Every news medium uses frames as organizing devices to create a coherent story. One of the examples I used was that during newsworthy demonstrations, the police often promote a "Law and Order" frame while protesters promote one of Injustice. It was also said that the news media are more likely to adopt a Law and Order frame not because

they inherently love the police, but because action is always more newsworthy than ideologies.

But to what degree will people who watch such news items adopt a Law and Order frame. Or will they use a different frame for making sense of what they are seeing? Some will certainly reject the Law and Order frame, especially those who identify with the protesters. Others will use their own individual frame. I would bet that some might even use what could be called the "Fashion frame" ("I can't believe what those kids are wearing"). In addition, many will simply forget the story within minutes (those using the Fashion frame will be especially likely to fall into this group).

Let's start with some fairly well known experiments suggesting that the way issues are framed influence the way people make decisions. In a classic experiment that was carried out by Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman people were asked to decide between two policies.<sup>3</sup> Here are the two possibilities the subjects were presented with:

Imagine that the U.S. is preparing for the outbreak of an unusual Asian disease, which is expected to kill 600 people. Two alternative programs to combat the disease have been proposed. Assume that the exact scientific estimates of the consequences of the programs are as follows:  
 If Program A is adopted, 200 people will be saved.  
 If Program B is adopted, there is a  $\frac{1}{3}$  probability that 600 people will be saved, and a  $\frac{2}{3}$  probability that no people will be saved.  
 Which of the two programs would you favor?  
 Program A or Program B?

Now before I continue I'll ask you to make your choice (no peeking please).

Unless you were over-thinking this, there is a 72 percent chance that you chose Program A. I know this because 72 percent of the people who were given this question in the experiment chose that possibility. The truth is that when scientists analyze this type of issue they immediately know that the two programs have the same "expected value" of saving 200 people. But the reason most people choose the first possibility is because they feel better about a definite benefit than a possible loss.

The researchers then made it more interesting by asking people to choose between the same two programs but framed them differently. If Program A is adopted, 400 people will die. If Program B is adopted, there is a  $\frac{1}{3}$  possibility that nobody will die and a  $\frac{2}{3}$  probability that 600 people will die. In this case 78 percent of the people chose *Program B*. This is really the same choice as the first example, but this time Program A looks less attractive because instead of *saving* 200 people you are condemning 400 people to *death*. Death is always an extremely powerful framing device.

George Quattrone and Amos Tversky carried out a similar experiment by asking people to choose between one program that would lead to 95 percent employment as opposed to a different one that would bring about 5 percent unemployment.<sup>4</sup> As you might expect, more people preferred the "employment"

policy than the second "unemployment" policy even though the expected results of the two policies were exactly the same.

It is clear from these examples that framing does make a difference about how people make choices. The way the choice is presented provides advantages to one possibility and disadvantages to another. This pattern should sound familiar from Chapter 3, which discussed how certain events (say a major oil spill) give some political actors (environmental groups) advantages and other actors (oil companies) disadvantages. The reason is that such events provide convincing "evidence" that one frame makes more sense than the other.

Here's another framing experiment that is closer to the political world. Thomas Nelson, Rosalee Clawson, and Zoe Oxley showed people two different news items about a Ku Klux Klan rally that had taken place in Ohio.<sup>5</sup> In the first news item there was an emphasis on a "Free Speech" frame: the question was whether the KKK should be allowed to speak to their supporters and for others to hear what the organization had to say. The second item employed a "Public Order" frame. It mostly talked about the dangers of violence either by Klan supporters or by counterdemonstrators. Many more people were willing to permit the rally to take place when the issue was framed as a civil rights issue than when it was framed as a question of public order.

The problem with all of these experiments is that people are told about something they never heard about and are only exposed to one frame rather than two or more competing frames. In addition, these experiments ignore the fact that certain groups have more legitimacy than others. Given that the Ku Klux Klan is considered by most Americans to be an extremist group, those promoting their right to free speech will probably be at a serious cultural disadvantage in their attempts to promote any legitimating frame.

What happens in real life is that when people form opinions about issues, they are usually exposed to more than one frame. In fact, when the frames are contested, citizens will often hear about both frames within the same news report. If you think about public debates about abortion, you will realize that this tends to limit the ability of one set of political actors to dominate the way people think about an issue (which is good news for a democracy). In addition, anybody who cares about this issue already has an opinion, and therefore there is little chance that they will simply accept a different frame being offered by the media.

In keeping with the theme of this chapter, framing is more likely to influence people's political thinking when the frames are unnoticed. Shanto Iyengar makes an important distinction in his work between two types of news frames.<sup>6</sup> "Episodic" frames present stories as individual events without putting what happened into a more general perspective. "Thematic" frames, on the other hand, provide some type of broader context and link the event to something more general. Consider two possible news stories about a husband killing his wife. The first story gives the details of the incident: who was involved, how he did it, and what the neighbors heard. This is a story with an episodic frame. The second also gives the details but then talks about the fact that this is the twentieth case this year of an abusive husband killing his wife in a certain city. The reporter in the

second example is likely to also ask what, if anything, the authorities are doing to deal with this problem. This would be an example of a thematic frame.

Iyengar stresses that the use of each frame type can have an effect on which people are seen as responsible for a social problem. When the media use an episodic frame, most people will only focus their anger at the husband. In the second story, on the other hand, the use of a thematic frame will generate anger at the police or the local government.

One of most interesting experiments carried out by Iyengar examined news frames of poverty. Iyengar found that poverty was rarely covered in the news, but when it was covered it was more likely to be covered using an episodic frame that only talked about a specific incident. In order to understand how this might affect opinions about poverty, different types of news stories were shown to groups of subjects. Some were shown news stories that used episodic frames that focused on individuals who were suffering because they were poor. One such story was about some families in the upper Midwest who were unable to pay their heating bills. The other participants were shown news stories that used a thematic frame that placed poverty in a more general political context. An example of this type of story was an item entitled "National Poverty" that documented both the increase in poverty and the significant reductions in federal social welfare programs. Iyengar hypothesized that those who watched the episodically framed news stories would be more likely to hold the poor people themselves responsible for their plight, while those who were exposed to the more thematically framed stories would tend to believe that the government and society were at fault. This is exactly what happened in his experiments.

This example clearly demonstrates that some of the most important effects of the news media are unintentional and unnoticed. The effects are unintentional because the reporters who construct the episodic stories about poverty had probably intended to help these victims and instead may have done more harm than good. If viewers come to the conclusion that the poor are responsible for their situation, there is really no reason for the government to do something about it. The effects are also unnoticed because, unless people are told to pay attention, they don't think that they are reacting to the fact that this serious social issue was presented as a personal story.

### ***Resisting Media Frames***

There are other reasons why political context is an important element in explaining the effects of news frames. Think back to our fictional character Mary. Mary was an active Obama supporter so she rejected the attempts by a news reporter to put a negative frame on a story about the candidate. As discussed, most people who make the effort to follow the news on a regular basis tend to form political opinions about political issues and thus they are less likely to accept competing frames being offered by press.

There is some evidence that this not only applies to ideological frames (calling a new health plan "creeping socialism") but also to more subtle frames having

to do with how to think about an issue. You will remember that in a previous chapter there was a discussion about the overuse by journalists of what is called the "strategic" frame for covering elections. Cappella and Jamieson talked about the "Spiral of Cynicism" in which journalists contributed to the overall distrust of politics by continually putting an emphasis on strategies and the ongoing contest and not enough on political substance.<sup>7</sup>

It was also suggested that while many people may accept this frame and become more cynical others may be more resistant. In an article entitled "A Spiral of Cynicism for Some," Nicholas Valentino, Matthew Beckmann, and Thomas Buhr examined which types of citizens are most likely to be influenced by strategic framing.<sup>8</sup> Subjects were divided into two groups. Both groups were presented with a news story in which the governor of Michigan, while running for election, puts forth a policy for cutting welfare benefits. One group was given what the researchers called an "issue" frame in which a political expert who said that "the governor sees this as an important issue for the voters of Michigan" and that "he has gained national prominence for his get-tough position." In the strategically framed version, the expert said that the governor is doing this to "get votes for himself," and the reporter followed this up with a comment that the governor is a "shrewd politician who knows how to use the welfare issue to get votes for himself." The researchers also added poll results to the strategy news item to further emphasize the "horse-race" perspective.

The authors found significant differences between those people who are partisans (identify with one of the political parties) and non-partisans. Non-partisans and people with less education were more likely to be affected by watching "strategic" news. They were more likely to say they weren't going to bother voting and expressed less trust in government. If these results tell us something about the general public, it means that those who are unaffiliated and are less educated are the ones who are most likely to accept the cynical framing that is so prevalent in elections news. To put it differently, their lack of political knowledge and commitment lowers their resistance to news frames.

There is one type of media framing that seems to work on everyone. It affects leaders and citizens, those who care about politics and those who don't, and people from every educational level. This type of situation emerges when there is only one *dominant, uncontested* frame that is used by all media reports. This is especially likely to occur when framing national enemies. Here too the power of the frame lies in the fact that is invisible: when everybody assumes something is true very few notice when news stories employ the frame.

Consider the "Cold War" frame that was so prevalent in the 1950s. There was broad agreement in the United States among both political parties on the need to stop the communists at all cost. It was hard to find anything in the American news media that even hinted at an alternative view.<sup>9</sup> Virtually every news story about the Soviet Union focused on the extent of the threat and what was being done to stop it. Those few individuals who attempted to suggest another approach were framed as political deviants or even traitors. When an entire society agrees on a certain political frame and the news media are constantly reinforcing it,

it would have taken an incredibly independent thinker to even find alternative sources of information about the Soviet Union. One could probably make a similar argument today about news frames of North Korea and Iran.

Please don't come to the conclusion from all this that when one dominating frame is being used it is always wrong. Sometimes it will be accurate, sometimes it will be wrong, and sometimes only part of the frame is wrong. The United States has real enemies and many of them represent serious threats to the country or even the world. Despite this fact, it is the role of a democratic press and the public to constantly question everything political leaders say. Even if the final conclusion ends up being one of agreement with the dominant frame, the questions need to be asked. McCarthyism probably could have ended much earlier if there had been more American journalists willing to challenge the idea that there were communists under every bed. The mainstream news media should also provide at least some room for alternative views long before they become popular. It is the truly free exchange of ideas that provides the best security for all democracies.

This may be much less of a problem today because of the Internet. As further discussed below, involved citizens have much greater and easier access to alternative perspectives. This is also true for reporters who work for the mainstream media; they too are only a few clicks away from a wide variety of critical views some of which no doubt find a way into their thinking. There will always be some frames that dominate media discourse but there is good reason to believe that those who wish to challenge these frames will find it easier to do so.

### Agenda Setting

A second important effect of the news media is agenda setting. The idea of agenda setting is pretty straight forward. When the news media put certain topics on the top of their agenda, these issues also then rise to the top of the public's agenda. How do researchers assess the effects of agenda setting? First you look at the major topics that are getting the most attention in the news. Let's assume that in a certain week the news media have made a big deal over say an economic recession, the war in Afghanistan, and suspicions that the secretary of Agriculture is secretly growing marijuana on his farm. If you conduct a survey and ask people "What, in your opinion are the three most important issues facing the United States today," these are the issues that most people will mention. These are the issues people are thinking about. The tagline for this effect is: "The news media may not tell us *what* to think, but they do tell us what to think *about*."<sup>10</sup>

Now, at first this may not seem either surprising or very important. But when you think about what happens afterwards, it becomes significant. The first thing to realize is that by telling us what to think about, the news media are also telling us what *not* to think about. Remember, we have a very limited view of the world. There are two entire continents that are almost never covered in the American news media: Africa and South America. That means that almost nothing that happens in these two large continents ever becomes a political issue

in the United States. This includes foreign elections, wars, disease, starvation, and major violations of human rights.

Just to give you a sense of this, Wayne Wanta, Guy Golan, and Cheolham Lee looked at the news coverage of foreign countries on four major networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, and CNN).<sup>11</sup> They looked at coverage of 138 elections that took place around the world in a period of about a year and a half. Only eight elections received coverage on all four networks, ten were covered on more than one network, eighteen were covered on only one network, and 102 were not covered at all. The amount of coverage of the two invisible continents was almost non-existent. Only one election in Latin American was covered by more than one network and *none* of the African elections were covered by more than one station.

It is important to emphasize at this point that if political leaders had any interest in these countries, they would automatically move up on the media agenda and then move up in the public agenda (consistent with the Politics-Media-Politics process). The same can be said about an issue that was discussed earlier: the huge number of people who die in traffic accidents. If political leaders thought this was an important issue, the media would quickly follow. It is therefore a mistake to only start looking at the issue of agenda setting by asking about how the news media influence the public. One must first ask *who is setting the media agenda?* This is often referred to in the literature as *agenda building* and has been one of the major topics covered in this book.<sup>12</sup>

This doesn't mean that the news media are totally blameless when important social problems or regions of the world are ignored. A truly independent news media would make a point of bringing up important issues that are being ignored by the political elite. This brings us back to Bennett's notion of indexing that was discussed in Chapter 1. If the news media only index what the political elite are dealing with at a particular time, it severely limits the contribution journalists are making to society. Unfortunately, while there are exceptions, most of the topics that are on the media agenda are initiated by the political leadership.

Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, who many consider the fathers of agenda setting theory, talk about another factor that can limit the ability of the news media to set the public agenda.<sup>13</sup> They make a distinction between "obtrusive" and "non-obtrusive" issues. An obtrusive issue is one with which people have personal experience. A good example is the price of gas. People don't need the news media to tell them that prices are going up; they can see it every time they go to fill up their tank. People are much less likely, on the other hand, to have personal experience with global warming (even if they tend to blame it whenever it's hot outside). So this issue is only likely to become a priority when it is emphasized in the news media.

An interesting study about this topic was carried out by Dunaway, Branton, and Abrajano concerning the extent to which people rated the problem of illegal immigration as important.<sup>14</sup> They made a distinction between people from border states, who were more likely to be dealing directly with the issue, and those from non-border states, who mostly heard about the issue of illegal immigration through the media. As would be expected, those who lived in the non-border

states were much more likely to be influenced by the media than those living in the border states. Those living in the border states were constantly concerned about this problem. This was an obtrusive issue for them. It was a non-obtrusive issue for the others, and this explains why they depended on the media to tell them when it became an important issue.

Agenda setting effects can also be important during election campaigns, especially primaries.<sup>15</sup> The news media help decide which candidates are electable and which aren't and this means that certain candidates are either on or off the public agenda. Remember the earlier example of the twelve parties that backed candidates in the 2008 presidential campaign (I'll bet you still can't name more than five of them)? The reason this becomes especially important during primaries is that, as discussed, the choices made by the news media can have a profound impact on the ability of candidates to raise money and mobilize volunteers. If a politician is no longer considered a "serious" candidate by the news media, he or she will get less attention and have a lower chance of being elected.

The news media do not just decide which candidate they prefer, they base their level of coverage on what is happening in the political world. At the start of the 2008 primaries, for example, most commentators assumed that Hillary Clinton was a lock for the Democratic primary and that Rudolf Giuliani was the front runner for the Republican nomination. John McCain was considered a long shot. When Barack Obama and John McCain started winning primaries the news media responded accordingly. It is also worth remembering that the news media made a big deal over Governor Mike Huckabee (remember him?) winning the Republican primary in Iowa, but his candidacy never really took off. So here, too, you start by asking what is happening in the political world before trying to understand how the news media responds and transforms it. Nevertheless, once the media has decided that someone is no longer a viable candidate, it is the kiss of death for most campaigns.

Agenda setting provides another example of why the most important media effects are unintentional and unnoticed. They are unintentional because when journalists decide what is most newsworthy, they are unlikely to think about how this will influence people's political priorities. These effects are also unnoticed because most members of the audience are naïve and take for granted the idea that if the news media are making a big deal out of something, it must be important. This type of invisible effect becomes even more important when we turn to the most fascinating of media effects: priming.

### Priming

Priming takes the basic ideas of agenda setting one step further. When the news media tell us what to think about, they are also indirectly telling us what to think. The reason is that when we think about certain topics rather than others, it changes how we evaluate candidates, leaders, and issues.

Here's how priming works. Assume there has been a major crime wave that has been dominating the news media agenda. It is right before an election, and one

candidate has a reputation for being tough on crime and the other is considered soft. When people think about each of the candidates they have been *primed*—or geared up—by the news media to compare the candidates in terms of how well each will deal with crime. This means due to fact that the crime wave is being emphasized in the media the "hard on crime" candidate will have an important advantage. Researchers Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder define priming effects as "changes in the standards people use in making political evaluations."<sup>16</sup>

After the 9/11 attack, for example, Americans' major concern was how to protect themselves from terrorism. Any political leader who was considered strong on this issue became more popular while any who was not linked to the issue of terrorism had a problem. The best example of someone whose popularity rose was New York City Mayor Rudolf Giuliani who was thought to be the leading Republican candidate for president in 2008, mostly because of how he had handled the crisis after the destruction of the Twin Towers. During the Republican primaries, the joke was that every Giuliani sentence had three parts: a noun, a verb, and 9/11.<sup>17</sup> Giuliani's problem was that by the time he ran for president, terrorism was much further down on the political and news agenda and the horrible state of the economy and the Iraq War had moved up. Using the new "economic ruler" by which to measure candidates, not only did Giuliani look like a less attractive contender, but because of President Bush—who many blamed for the economic crisis—the entire Republican Party had a problem.

The difference between agenda setting and priming is that agenda setting only relates to the correlation between the media agenda and the public agenda. Priming takes the process further and asks about the *consequences* of the changing public agenda. How does putting an emphasis on a particular issue affect how we evaluate candidates or decide our position concerning certain issues? This is what makes priming a much more interesting and an important effect to consider.

The evidence for priming effects on voters is pretty solid. A good example is a study by James Druckman that looked at the 2000 race for the U.S. Senate in Minnesota.<sup>18</sup> First, he looked at the news media coverage of that campaign and found that there was a disproportionate emphasis on two issues: social security and the integrity of leaders. Druckman then looked at how much people paid attention to news about the campaign and which factors were the most important in deciding how to vote. Those citizens who intensely follow the campaign in the media cited Social Security and leaders' integrity as the most important in determining their vote. They were primed to think about the candidates within the context of those two issues. Voters who weren't so interested in following the campaign used other criteria for deciding for whom to vote.

There is something surprising in this study. It is those who *do* take an interest in politics that are most likely to be primed. It means that those who are not paying much attention to the election news may actually be more independent in the way they think about the campaign. In this case the lower the level of involvement, the fewer the effects.

The effects of priming provide important insight into why the struggle over the campaign agenda is so important. Political scientists often talk about political

parties “taking ownership” over certain issues. The Republicans, for example, are often seen as being tougher on crime than the Democrats. If they can convince the news media that crime is an important election issue, then it gives them major advantages over their opponents. This emphasis in coverage may have been one of the ways Republican George H. W. Bush defeated Democrat Michael Dukakis in the 1988 election.<sup>19</sup> As discussed in Chapter 4, the Bush campaign ran a large number of ads saying that as Governor of Massachusetts, Dukakis had supported a furlough program for inmates that allowed violent criminals out on the streets. The ads themselves were less important than the massive amount of attention these attacks received in the news. There was then a significant rise in the number of people saying they intended to vote for Bush.

The importance of the priming effects became even more obvious four years later when Bush was defeated by Clinton with the now famous four word slogan: “It’s the Economy Stupid.” The sign was put up at Clinton’s campaign headquarters to remind everyone to always talk about the economy because this was Clinton’s strongest issue.<sup>20</sup>

The effects of priming are not limited to the way we think about political candidates; they can also influence political attitudes. Research has shown, for example, that African Americans are overrepresented in crime coverage.<sup>21</sup> Researchers Travis Dixon and Cristina Azocar carried out a very interesting experimental study that looked at how this type of coverage could prime Americans to have more negative attitudes towards Blacks.<sup>22</sup> The question they asked was whether heavy users of television news were more likely to develop a “Black Criminal Stereotype.” They hypothesized that when such people were exposed to a crime story with an “unidentified” suspect, this would activate the stereotype and this would have an effect on how they thought about race and crime. In other words, they were being primed to link crime with being Black. They found—after controlling for other factors—that heavy news viewers who were exposed to this “race neutral” type of crime story were indeed more likely to express negative attitudes about African Americans. More specifically, heavy users were more likely to say that any lack of success on the part of Blacks was their own fault and viewers were also more likely to support the death penalty (presumably because they assumed that Black criminals had a *predisposition* for crime).

An interesting study by Patricia Moy, Michael Xenos, and Verena Hess found that priming effects were not limited to what was being reported in the news.<sup>23</sup> One of the newer phenomena in U.S. electoral politics is for the candidates to appear on late night comedy programs such as the *Tonight Show* with Jay Leno or the *Late Show* with David Letterman. The authors were interested in finding out whether the fact that these candidates were emphasizing certain personal traits on these shows would affect the criteria people used to evaluate them. The researchers examined what happened during the 2000 election campaign and compared those who had seen George Bush on David Letterman and those who had not. Those who watched the show were more likely to think of George Bush as a caring individual. More importantly, this trait became a critical criterion in determining their overall opinion of Bush: viewers had been *primed*

to think about his caring personality when giving an opinion about him.<sup>24</sup> For non-viewers the caring criteria was far less important. So when thinking about priming, it would be a mistake to limit our focus to the news media. Entertainment shows can be just as important a source for these types of effects.

### *Do the New Media Change Everything?*

There is an interesting discussion going on in the field of political communication concerning how the advent of the new media may have altered everything we know about media effects (just when we thought we were getting somewhere). One of the more intriguing arguments being made is that because of the major changes that have taken place in the way people consume political information, we can no longer talk about the effects of the “mass” media. Citizens, especially younger citizens, have far more choices about where to get their news, and not all of these sources are going to have the same frames or agenda. This discussion is related to the earlier claim that we are moving from an era of broadcasting to the age of narrowcasting.

Steven Chaffee and Miriam Metzger were among the first to talk about this question in an article with the provocative title: “The End of Mass Communication.”<sup>25</sup> They argued that as people find themselves with an increasingly diverse number of sources for political information talking about universal frames and agenda makes less sense. When talking about agenda setting, they put it this way: “the key problem for agenda-setting theory will change from what issues the media tell people to think about to what issues people tell the media they want to think about.”<sup>26</sup>

Lance Bennett and Shanto Iyengar make a similar point in a more recent piece.<sup>27</sup> One of the important points they make is that a good deal of the audience for television news was made up of “inadvertent” viewers. These were viewers who simply decided to watch the news because it was the only thing on television. Today people have so many different choices of what to watch and when to watch it that the audience for network news is shrinking. The authors point out that between 1968 and 2003 the total audience for network news fell by more than 30 million viewers. One of the most significant changes in this new era is that the audience is becoming increasingly *fragmented* meaning that there are many different audiences absorbing very different types of content. Given this situation, it makes little sense then to talk about a unified agenda or frame. We may be moving, say the authors, towards an age of minimal effects.

It is far too early however to completely abandon the notions of framing, agenda setting and priming. It is worth remembering that many of the issues that are discussed on the Internet and in the blogosphere are first raised in the mass media. This is certainly true when it comes to the largest events such as elections, wars, natural disasters, and economic crises. When topics get hot, they get hot everywhere, and this means that agenda setting and priming are still relevant in the digital age.



If there is one type of effect that is the most likely to be influenced by the advent of the Internet, it is framing. As people are turning to an increasing variety of communication channels they are being exposed to a much wider variety of political frames. For the most part, this development should be considered good news because citizens in a healthy democracy should learn about a variety of viewpoints. The problem is that many people may use their new found freedom to avoid hearing any opposing views. They will only turn to cable news channels, Internet sites and blogs that share their own view of the world. This behavior is referred to as *selective exposure*.

In any case framing, agenda setting, and priming are still three very useful ways of thinking about how media, in all its forms, can affect us. The digital revolution may very well lead us to change the way we think about these effects, but the basic concepts remain important.

### Learning and Persuasion

There are two other types of media effects that have received a considerable amount of attention in the field of political communication: learning and persuasion. The idea of learning is pretty straight forward and looks at how much people learn from the media as well as trying to identify the types of citizens who are most likely to learn. The underlying assumption is that the more knowledge citizens have the more likely they are to make informed choices and this makes for a healthier democracy. The second effect researchers look at is persuasion: how much people are influenced to change their political attitudes or behavior as a result of being exposed to content from different types of media. Most of the questions in this area have to do with the effectiveness of political advertising, especially during election campaigns.

There's good news and bad news about political learning from the media. The good news is that people can learn from almost every type of media: hard news, soft news and even political ads. The fact that one can learn from hard news is hardly surprising. While nobody can remember every individual news item they've seen or read, some of that information will inevitably be retained. The fact that people can also learn from soft news is an especially encouraging finding because it suggests that even those who watch these shows looking for entertainment get something meaningful out of the experience.

Matthew Baum and Angela Jamieson have coined a great name for this: "The Oprah Effect" (although once Oprah's show goes off the air, they may have to change the name).<sup>28</sup> The study was carried out in 2000, an election year in which candidates from both parties made appearances on day time talk shows. They found in the study that 28 percent of Americans reported watching at least one day time talk show, so we are talking about a significant proportion of the public. The researchers were interested in whether people who watched these shows were in a better position to vote "consistently," meaning that there was a connection between voters' opinions about various issues and the candidate they support. Baum and Jamieson found that, all other things being equal, people who watched

these shows exhibited more consistent voting than those who didn't watch. As the authors point out, this suggests that soft news may be helping certain types of citizens to be more knowledgeable: "Some may need *The New York Times* to determine which candidate they 'ought' to favor; others may do just as well with Oprah."<sup>29</sup> This is another good example, by the way, of an inadvertent media effect because most viewers seek entertainment but end up gaining more political knowledge.

People can also learn inadvertently from watching political advertisements. Political ads have a pretty bad reputation. They are often stereotyped as a base and vulgar form of emotional manipulation with no redeeming social qualities. It turns out, however, that a closer look at political ads reveals that they have quite a bit of significant content. They tell voters something about the candidates, about the issues that are deemed relevant, and at least something about the policies and legislation the candidates hope to enact. In fact, given that so much of the news deals with the horse race between the candidates, one can often find more substantive information in the advertisements than in election news.

Studies have shown that people can learn quite a bit from political advertising.<sup>30</sup> They can learn about which issues seem to be the most important in a particular election and about some of the candidate's positions on certain issues. In addition, they generate interest in the campaign, and this should assumedly lead at least some people to search for more information either through the traditional news media or through the Internet.

### *The Bad News about Learning from the Media*

There is, however, some bad news about learning from the news media. The first piece of bad news is that not everything people "learn" from the news is accurate. One of the more important ideas in communication traditions is called *Cultivation Theory*.<sup>31</sup> Originally developed by George Gerbner and Larry Gross, those that support this theory believe that heavy viewers of television come to believe that what is shown there provides a mirror to reality.<sup>32</sup> Their minds are "cultivated" by watching too much television such that a distorted view of reality can grow. The researchers were especially concerned with findings that suggested that due to the heavy amount of violence on television, those who watch see the world as much more violent than it really is. This finding is very similar to the previously discussed principle of representative deviance whereby people come to mistakenly believe that the deviant behavior shown in the media represents what generally happens. The theory has received plenty of criticism over the years, but many still support the central claims.<sup>33</sup>

One particularly notable piece of research in this tradition was carried out by Daniel Romer, Kathleen Jamieson, and Sean Aday.<sup>34</sup> They were interested in trying to understand why the American public in the nineties continued to believe that violent crime was a widespread national problem despite that fact that this type of crime had dropped dramatically. The researchers hypothesized that one important source of misinformation about this phenomenon was local

news. Local news is infamous for the amount of emphasis it puts on violent crime. In keeping with the tenets of theory, they hypothesized that the more people watched local news, the more they would fear crime, and the more likely they would overestimate the risks of becoming a victim. Based on data from three different studies, this is exactly what the researchers found. People who were heavy viewers of local news had a more distorted view of reality when it came to crime than those watched less.

Here too we are talking about a media effect that is both unintended and unnoticed. Journalists who produce local news focus on violent crime not because they want to deceive people; it is simply good for business. In addition, it is extremely unlikely that people who are heavy viewers of local news realize their perceptions are being influenced by what they see. If asked, they no doubt know that local news focuses on the most dramatic things that happened in their city. But because they are not asked, they remain unaware of how these news reports shape their perceptions about crime.

The other piece of bad news about learning from the media has to do with who benefits most. Here the research concerns who gains the most actual knowledge from the news. As in many things in life, the informationally rich get richer and the poor remain poor. People who care about politics are not only the ones most likely to follow the news, they are also the ones most like to understand and remember what they heard. This difference is often associated with a person's social class. Reasons for this difference include the fact that families with more income are usually better educated, have more communication skills for acquiring and remembering information, and often find themselves living in a culture that encourages keeping up with current affairs. This difference between the classes is often referred to as the "knowledge gap."<sup>35</sup>

One question that has emerged is whether the advent of the digital age could make a difference and help eliminate or at least reduce the size of the knowledge gap. Markus Prior has done research on this issue and his conclusions are far from encouraging.<sup>36</sup> He found that, if anything, the creation of cable television and the Internet has *increased* the gaps in political knowledge. He argues that because people have many more choices, those who are interested in entertainment are less likely to be exposed to news. Perhaps even more worrisome was his conclusion that those who turned to cable television and the new media for entertainment were also less likely to vote than those who didn't have access to those communication channels.

There is, then, a significant controversy in the field about the effects of the new media. The more optimistic researchers are saying that the fact that so many people are looking for entertainment is not so bad because they unintentionally learn something about politics along the way. The pessimistic scholars claim that because people find it much easier to get entertainment through the media, the knowledge gap is getting worse. Confused? The jury is still out on this important question, and hopefully we will have firmer conclusions about this topic in the coming years.

### *Is Anybody Actually Persuaded?*

Political leaders and activists spend a great deal of time trying to convince people of lots of things. They try to convince them to vote a certain way, to recycle, to come out to a protest, to oppose the death penalty, to support women's right to choose, or to move to a commune in Nebraska where people only consume food that starts with the letter "g" (you end up eating mostly grapes, granola, and gummy bears). The most important question for all of these groups is how can we convince people to do what we want?

Anyone who could provide a simple answer to that question would be very, very rich. After all, think of the hundreds of millions of dollars companies and political candidates pour into marketing and advertising. Even if there was some type of answer, however, everyone would soon be using the major formula. If both sides in a competition are using the same strategy, they would simply cancel each other and neither side would have any advantage. In addition, if there was such a magical method, it would no doubt be reported in the news media and people would learn how *not* to be persuaded. Therefore, I would like to persuade you to sell this start-up persuasion company as quickly as possible!

The truth is that the earlier discussions about framing and priming were also concerned with persuasion. When political actors attempt to influence how the news media frame certain events or issues, they assume that if they succeed their preferred frames will then be adopted by audiences. Similarly, when candidates struggle over the media agenda during an election campaign, their goal is to convince people to think about specific topics and not others. Although not all campaign managers are familiar with the term *priming*, they know that getting people to think about certain issues will often persuade them to vote a certain way.

Other paths of persuasion are more direct, such as when a candidate, a political party, or a political organization sends out a message either through a speech that is reported in the media (including Internet sites and blogs) or through political advertisements. There are two major questions that are of interest: (1) How easily can people be persuaded by political messages? (2) Which types of citizens are most likely to be persuaded?

John Zaller, a political scientist who has done path-breaking work in the field of public opinion, has some helpful insights for answering these questions. Zaller has theorized that when someone develops or changes their opinion about something, they go through three states, *Receive*, *Accept*, and *Sample*. His theory is known as the *RAS model*.<sup>37</sup>

The first step in anybody being influenced is that they have to be exposed to some type of persuasive message (they receive it). There are quite a few citizens who don't come into contact with political messages. They don't watch it on television, they don't read a newspaper, and they never read a political blog. They may be exposed to political advertisements during an election campaign or when political movements initiate a campaign, but when citizens have no

interest, they are unlikely to pay much attention. Some of these people have opinions about political issues and many don't. In either case there is little point in asking whether they are influenced by the political messages—they rarely see them.

People can also avoid receiving messages they disagree with by confining themselves as much as possible to news sources that tell them what they like to hear. This is what was referred to earlier as selective exposure. Consistent with what was said earlier about an increasingly fragmented audience, it becomes easier in the age of cable TV and the Internet to avoid media sources that carry content with which we disagree. According to a Pew Research report published in 2009, there has been an increasing gap in the proportion of Republicans and Democrats who watch either the more conservative Fox News or either MSNBC or CNN.<sup>38</sup> In 2008, 45 percent of the MSNBC viewers were Democrats and only 18 percent of this audience were Republicans. The CNN audience had a similar breakdown: it was composed of 51 percent Democrats and 18 percent Republicans. When it came to Fox news, the numbers were pretty much reversed: 36 percent of Republicans regularly watched Fox and only 21 percent of Democrats were viewers. The findings concerning which political blogs people follow are even more striking. Lawrence, Sides, and Farrell found that 94 percent of political blog readers consume only blogs from one side of the political spectrum. So one way to protect yourself from attitude change is to simply avoid coming in contact with views that annoy you.

The second stage in Zaller's model looks at whether people accept what they heard in the media as true.<sup>39</sup> This again takes us back to Mary who rejected the anti-Obama news story. The reporter was using what might be called a "Weak on Iran" frame by criticizing Obama for offering to open negotiations with the enemy. Mary refused to accept that frame and her anger was directed at the media for being so cynical. As discussed, people who follow the news on a regular basis usually have pretty firm opinions, especially about major issues such as who should be the next president. These people do not passively watch the news, they actively struggle with it. You might know some people who yell at the TV and some who even throw things at it.

So, you might wonder, if people are so good at protecting themselves from changing their opinions why is there any attitude change at all? This brings us to the third part of Zaller's model, *Sample*. Zaller puts forth the rather novel idea that when people form an opinion about something, they base their thinking on considerations they have on the top of their heads at the time they are asked. People take only a *sample* of all possible considerations, and the ones they choose have a direct influence on that opinion. The way people take a sample is certainly not random. The considerations that are easiest to think about are those that are being emphasized in the news media at a particular time and place.

Take, for example, opinions about the death penalty. Assume that there has been a great deal of emphasis in the news media on the rise of violent crime in a particular state. When people are asked about their attitudes towards the death penalty, the consideration of stopping crime will be foremost in their minds. In

this situation the proportion of people who favor the death penalty will rise. If, however, there have been major news stories about inmates on death row who have been found innocent because of DNA, evidence the number of people in favor of the death penalty will probably drop.

If you think Zaller's third stage sounds a bit like priming, you're right. In priming we talk about how people change their standards or criteria for evaluating candidates because of a change in the media agenda, and Zaller talks about changing considerations. This notion of changing considerations is also linked to the ongoing struggle over the news agenda during election campaigns. What is on media agenda influences what is on the "top of people's heads" and this in turn influences which considerations they use to evaluate candidates. If candidates are able to have an impact on the news agenda, or if they just get lucky because of a major event raises their issue to the top of the media agenda, more people will vote for them.

### *Who Is Most Likely to be Influenced?*

There are also some people who are more likely to be influenced by the media content than others. While there is a huge amount of research on this issue, the discussion here will focus on the variable that Zaller has emphasized in his work: political awareness.<sup>40</sup> Political awareness refers to the extent to which people are interested and follow politics and is closely related to the level of political knowledge. Although you might think so, it is *not* the least politically aware who are the most persuadable. The reason is that, as discussed, this group doesn't receive much political information so they can't really be influenced. It is also not those with the most political awareness who are more easily persuaded because these citizens have enough knowledge to reject messages with which they disagree. So who's left?

As it turns out, those with the *middle* level of political awareness are the most likely to be influenced by the media. This group has enough previous political knowledge to receive and understand the messages they receive but not enough to provide counter arguments. In other words, they are more likely to accept what they receive from the media. Now, just in case you happen to be in this group, I should reassure you that even this group is not easily persuaded. It is simply that they are the group that is most *likely* to be persuaded by what they see and hear.

The relationship between political awareness and persuadability is what researchers call a *curvilinear* relationship. This means that if we were to make a graph where political awareness was on the horizontal axis (the x axis) and persuadability was put on the vertical axis (the y axis) the line would not be straight but would look like an upside-down U. As political awareness rises, it increases the degree to which someone is persuadable until it reaches a certain high point and when it passes that point increasing awareness leads to *less* persuadability. This somewhat complicated relationship may explain the mixed results of research on this topic.

Gregory Huber and Kevin Arceneaux carried out an excellent study that, among other things, looked directly at the question of which voters were the most likely to be persuaded by political advertisements.<sup>41</sup> This was an extremely sophisticated study that put a great deal of effort into isolating the effects of political advertisements from all the other factors that may change people's minds during an election campaign. The researchers were interested in looking at people who lived in particular media markets where there were quite a bit more political advertising for Al Gore when compared to those who lived in markets where there were many more ads for George W. Bush. In many ways this study was one of the best in answering the question of whether putting more money into advertising is a good investment for candidates.

The results they found suggest that it is money well spent. They found that these advertisements had an extremely large impact on how people planned to vote, especially on the undecided. Equally important they confirmed Zaller's hypothesis about a curvilinear relationship between political awareness and opinion change. It was the group with a middling amount of awareness that was the most likely to be persuaded by political ads.

This finding suggests that, despite the overall theme of this chapter, there are some citizens who can be persuaded even when they are paying attention. People who don't have a firm opinion about an issue and have an intermediate level of political awareness are the ones who are most likely to fall into this category. Nevertheless, two points are worth bearing in mind. First, when people are undecided about an issue it makes more sense to suggest that they are *forming* an opinion rather than *changing* it. Whether this should be considered persuasion might be open to debate. Second, it is important to remember that this group is unlikely to be searching for political information but rather to come by it accidentally (e.g., through advertisements on television). It is reasonable to assume that those who are inadvertently exposed to political content are not paying as much attention as those who search for it.

### *Just Like Selling Soap?*

One often hears the claim that selling a candidate is the same as selling any other product, such as soap. It is true that some of the same professionals are involved in both types of advertising and some of the marketing techniques have quite a bit in common. Nevertheless, there are important differences between the two types of persuasion. It is because of these differences that convincing someone to change their vote or their opinion about an issue is considerably more difficult than convincing them to try a new soap.

The first major difference is that most people are usually more emotionally engaged when they think about politics. People who vote usually take their decision seriously, and the act of voting says something important about them and their worldview, probably more so than what brand of soap they use. This means that when someone tries to convince them about politics—especially if it is seen as advertising—they are more likely to resist.

Another reason the act of voting is different than buying soap is that the people are only asked to make a decision every few years and, even if they change their mind, they will have to wait for quite a bit of time before they can express that change of heart. Voting is in many ways an investment that you hope will bring you some nice returns. But even if it doesn't, you can't pull your money out until the next election. With soap, you can always throw it out, or if money is especially tight you can finish it and buy a different brand the next time. Hence, most people take their political decisions more seriously than their shopping choices.

A final and very important difference is that when you see advertisements about soap, they will probably be the only messages you will hear about it. Unless you are an extremely savvy consumer with a lot of time on your hands to go research reviews, almost all of the information you have about the product comes from advertising. When it comes to politics, however, there are plenty of alternative and competing sources of information including one that has been the central focus of this book: the news. People are also much more likely to discuss politics both in person and online while intense arguments about soap are pretty rare. This is referred to in the literature as interpersonal communication and it provides another competing source to political advertisements. The fact that people receive political information from so many different sources reduces the likelihood that any one source, such as advertising will persuade them to change their opinions.

If you want to compare persuading a person how to vote a certain way to shopping, then you'd do much better to think about someone buying a car. For most of us, this is a serious decision; it almost always involves a commitment of at least a few years. Also, when we buy a new car we are saying something about ourselves. Is it a fairly average car or a luxurious one? Is it a gas guzzler, a hybrid, or something in between? Is it a sports car, an executive sedan, or a SUV? Think about this for a second. What are the chances that you are going to make your decision about which car to buy based on a few advertisements? Car ads are designed to have you *consider* a particular model when you make your final decision. The truth is that if you like the car you are driving, there is a pretty good chance that you will buy the same model (or vote for the same party) the next time around.

### **To Sum Up**

The point to remember in all this is that just as the news media should not be considered mere conveyor belts for passing on information to the public, so the public should never be seen as passive consumers of news. This was always true, but many people have become even more active in the way they search and relate to political information because of cable television and the Internet. You need to start with the idea that some people choose to follow the news and some don't. Some prefer to get political information from fake news and entertainment programs, and some prefer to spend a lot of their time reading political blogs or

discussing things with their friends on Facebook. In addition, citizens come to the news with different levels of political knowledge and understanding, with different views on politics, and with different sets of topics that interest them.

The idea that the most important media effects are unnoticed is an important one. Whether it be framing, agenda setting, priming, or just plain persuasion, we find that researchers should pay the *most* attention when everyone else is paying the *least*. Most people are very aware when political leaders are trying to persuade them or even when the news media are promoting a certain line. But many of the frames and agenda employed by the news media seem natural and appropriate; the audience is almost never thinking about the editorial choices that have been made or how this might influence the way they think about politics.

There is nothing inherently evil about all this. A change in the political environment often *demand*s a change in our priorities, and there is often something positive about the news media bringing new issues to our attention. There is nothing wrong with citizens being constantly challenged to reconsider their beliefs about an issue or a political leader. Too much stability within the public can lead to political stagnation.

The goal of this book is to make you more aware of how the media-politics relationship works so you can be a more sophisticated consumer of news. The hope is that the next time you encounter these situations you will give some thought about how the frames and agenda presented by the media are having an influence on your views of the political world.

### Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. Do you think the news media have any influence on the way you think about politics? Do you think it has an influence on other people you know? Give some examples to support your position.
2. Think about the major political issues that the news media are dealing with this week. Based on what you learned about agenda setting, would you say that you have been thinking more about these issues or discussing them with people you know? Now think about the media effect known as priming. If the national elections were to be held today, would the fact that one of these issues was high on the media agenda provide important advantages to one of the political parties? Why?

## A Postscript

Hopefully, you now have a better understanding of how the media and political worlds come together. The combined world is one in which millions of political actors compete over tens of thousands of different types of media to achieve their political goals. The goals range from getting elected to something more ambitious such as slowing the rate of global warming or bringing peace to an area plagued by war. Almost all of these actors realize that they have little chance of political success unless they first achieve a certain amount of success in promoting their groups and their ideas to the media.

Promoting one's ideas to the media is never as easy as it seems. The amount of space and time available is limited, and editors can only include an extremely small number of political actors every day. Actors can, of course, start their own blogs or alternative news sites where they will have an unlimited amount of room to express themselves. The problem is that the audience for such sites is extremely small. Those lucky enough to get into the more traditional media will face other problems. Once their ideas and actions have been turned into news stories, they rarely resemble the original inputs and sometimes come out completely unrecognizable. Journalists have their own interests when they construct news stories and, while some transformations can help, others can be quite destructive to their cause.

The public has its own agenda. Political scientists sometimes seem to think that everyone is as interested in politics as they are. The truth is that unless something big happens most people are understandably far more interested in their own lives than in what is happening in their government, let alone in the rest of the world. Those who do follow the news on a regular basis have their own set of routines for dealing with it, and most stories are quickly forgotten. Those news stories that do linger in their minds often go through a cognitive transformation that can be just as significant as the one that took place when the original event was turned into news.

It is also important to remember that those attempting to use the media to achieve political goals are not always directing their efforts at the general public. The news media can also be a powerful tool for pressuring politicians, government officials, or even other countries. While convincing members of the public is often helpful, communicating with decision makers is often far more critical for