

## Current Trends and Future Directions

In the summer of 2013, the *Washington Post* stunned the news world with the announcement of its pending sale to Amazon.com founder and chief executive Jeff Bezos. The sale would end eighty years of control by the Graham family, who led the *Post* for decades and guided its ascension to world-renowned news institution and important player in the nation's politics.

The *Washington Post's* sale is but one example of the consequences legacy media face in the ever-changing modern media landscape. Though the Graham family resisted the idea of selling the *Post* for years, the paper had been unable to avoid financial hardship induced by the multiplicity of competitors accompanying the shift to digital media. Though Jeff Bezos's technological expertise and long-term outlook were attractive characteristics, he was an appealing buyer for the *Post* for several other reasons not associated with his performance with Amazon. Primarily, he could afford to provide financial support for the news organization while it experimented with new business models, and thus far, his plans for the *Post* have involved just that. Prominent observers of the purchase also suggested that Bezos's financial backing and the return to a privately controlled ownership model would allow the *Washington Post* the flexibility needed to stay afloat and continue to produce quality news while testing out new streams of revenue. The return to private ownership models is one way some news organizations have sought to cope with the financial pressures in the current media environment.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, journalism is changing. But how much?

We do not know. We do know that the news supply is growing geometrically. Much of it is variations on the same theme. But even keeping that in mind, it is clear that the supply of news, especially political news, far exceeds the demand, or even the ability of humans to consume it within the limits of an inelastic, twenty-four-hour day. As discussed in chapter 4, we know that people select their news intake carefully, in line with their needs and interests. Therefore, the vast majority of political and nonpolitical messages in cyberspace, including important ones, will find few listeners and viewers. Narrowcasting cannot match the impact of broadcasting; its reach is narrow, as the name suggests. In the battle for audience attention, trusted sources have a distinct advantage, be they legacy media or old and new

political organizations. Audiences do not want to be misled by unknown information providers.

Nonetheless, journalism is definitely changing, but probably less drastically than many news media watchers believe. Predictions of cosmic changes are not new. They surfaced when the telegraph was invented, when the transatlantic cable was laid, and when wire services acquired a global reach. All of these technological advances emerged within the same thirty-odd years in the mid-nineteenth century. It is not that there is nothing new under the sun. It is just that we are not in a very good position to see which of the social changes of the past five or ten or twenty-five years are likely to prove earth-shattering several decades from now. And maybe these changes are not shattering the earth so much as reshaping it, keeping the basic principles and ground rules intact.<sup>2</sup>

Who is right in assessing the impact of digital communication technologies, which make continuous interactions among people simple? Is it the prophets of revolution who predict an entirely new era or the incrementalists who predict far more modest changes? Why are current trends so confusing that experienced journalists can see them moving in vastly different directions? What conclusions can we draw from the developments this book has examined? Those are the questions that we will tackle in this final chapter. We will highlight the forces pushing for major changes in communications policies and practices and the obstacles that lie in the way. We will assess news making and explore some of the areas of disenchantment with mass media performance that have fueled demands for reform and the steps that dissatisfied communicators and audiences have taken to improve and supplement the existing information supply. The potential impact of major new technologies on politics and policy alternatives will be examined. Finally, we will try to discern whether the arrival of the digital era heralds important advances in democratic governance.

### APPRAISING NEWS MAKING

Do newspeople do a good job in selecting the types of news and entertainment they cover? Do they allot appropriate time and space to each of these categories? Do they fill them with good individual stories? The answers depend on the standards that the analyst applies. If one contends that news can and should be a mirror of society, then news making leaves much to be desired. By emphasizing the exceptional rather than the ordinary, a few regular beats rather than a wide range of news sources, and conflict and bad news rather than the ups and downs of daily life, the media picture a world that is far from reality. Reality becomes further distorted because the process of shaping news events into interesting, coherent stories often gives those events new meanings and significance. That is why critics claim that the news creates reality rather than reports it.<sup>3</sup>

If one shares the belief of many journalists and other elites that the media should serve as the eyes and ears of intelligent citizens who are hungry for news of major social and political significance, one will again find fault with news making. The media devote much space and time to trivia and ignore many interesting developments or report them so briefly that their meaning is lost. Often the human interest appeal of a story or its sensational aspects distract the audience from the story's real significance.<sup>4</sup>

Appraisal scores are far from perfect when one measures the media by their professed story formulas. An analysis of 352 average-length television news reports, selected from November 24 to December 23, 2008, yielded 271 routine stories and showed that only one of seven key story elements (who, what, where, when, why, how, and context) was nearly always covered. Most stories included major factual elements—what actually took place. Slightly fewer stories told who was involved and where and when it happened. Coverage was less regular when it came to stating why the reported event took place, how it occurred, and in what context. The audience received the facts of what had happened but not the information that would help it grasp the meaning and implications of the facts. As we learned in earlier chapters, news values predict what stories make the news and how they are covered.

To find fault is easy; to suggest realistic remedies is far more difficult. Few critics agree on what is noteworthy enough to deserve publication. Gradations and ranks in significance depend on the observer's worldview and political orientation. One person's intellectual meat is another's poison. Conservatives would like to see more stories about the misdeeds of the country's enemies and about waste and abuse in social service programs. Liberals complain that the media legitimize big business and the military and neglect social reforms and radical perspectives.

When the media have featured controversial public policy issues, such as the dangers of nuclear energy generation or the merits of a new health care system, or when they cover political campaigns or demonstrations, each side often charges that political bias dictated the choices about inclusion and exclusion of content and about the story's focus and tone. A number of content analyses of such stories definitively refute the charges of pervasive political bias, if bias is defined as deliberately lopsided coverage or intentional slanting of news. These analyses show instead that most newspeople try to cover a balanced array of issues in a neutral manner and do include at least a few contrasting viewpoints. But given the constraints on the number of sources that can be used and the desire to produce exciting stories that top the competition, the end product is rarely a balanced reflection of all elite viewpoints and all shades of public opinion.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, as mentioned, the prevailing political culture colors everything because it provides the standards by which events are judged and interpreted.

When coverage is unbalanced, as happens often, the reasons generally spring from the news-making process rather than from politically or ideologically

motivated slanting. For instance, the media covered famine conditions in Somalia because that country was fairly accessible. They ignored similar conditions in Sudan because travel was too difficult there. Journalists report events happening in major cities more fully nationwide than similar events in smaller communities because the cities are better equipped for news collection and transmission. The New Hampshire presidential primary receives disproportionately heavy coverage because it happens to be the first one in a presidential election year. (As the first caucus in the election cycle, Iowa, also receives enormous attention—from candidates and the press.) These imbalances are common across many media systems. In India, the norms of the for-profit English-language press prioritize victim status and sensationalism when deciding when and how to cover rape (see Box 14-1).

#### BOX 14-1 Norms of Rape Reporting in India

When details of the December 2012 gang rape first began to filter into India's newsrooms, editors were faced with the decision of whether to run the story on the front page. Three facts stood out: the victim was a student, she had been to an upmarket shopping mall before she was attacked, and she had also just watched an English-language movie. These factors marked her out as a middle- or upper-class Indian woman, which in turn made her story more compelling for the wealthy, urban readership of India's English-language press. "There is this term we use called PLU—it means 'people like us,'" says former *Times of India* reporter Smriti Singh. "Whenever there is a murder or rape case involving a female, in your head you have a checklist as to whether the story qualifies to be reported or not."

Being a PLU, or of the right socioeconomic class, means your story is far more likely to be covered by the English-language press. On the surface, the Delhi student appeared to be the ultimate PLU victim. In fact, as details emerged of her family background, it became clear she was not from the established middle class, but was aspiring to transcend her working-class roots as the daughter of a laborer. But by the time this was known, the case was unstoppable. Every newspaper wanted as much detail as it could get about the case.

"There is a vast country beyond Delhi and Mumbai, and there is a lot of crime happening there, and those people are in need of exposure and a platform," says Priyanka Dubey, a reporter who describes herself as a lower-middle-class Hindu who has struggled to have stories on sexual violence published in the English-language media.

Two other factors led to the Delhi gang rape dominating the English-language press: the victim was seen as blameless for her crime, and the crime was especially violent. The Indian media often report rape as a crime of lust and passion, in which sexually precocious women can provoke men to attack. There is a lack of analysis of the complex patriarchal, societal, and economic factors that underlie much sexual

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violence. In the case of the Delhi rape, the victim was brutally raped after the innocent action of boarding a bus to take her home. The dispute over victim and perpetrator accounts that often accompanies rape was absent in this case. The victim was heralded as “Nirbhaya”—the braveheart or fearless one. There was no ambiguity in her status as a heroine who could be celebrated.

Similarly the extreme nature of the violence against the victim meant that her story could be championed by the press, which highlighted the visceral details of how she had been repeatedly raped and sodomized. “The story was inherently sensational and the coverage was driven by the conviction that people were very curious to know about it and there was competition with other newspapers,” says former *Times of India* editor Manoj Mitta. This extreme violence has now become a benchmark for reporting new rape cases in India.

It is now more than five years since the Delhi gang rape, and although other recent incidents have gained press attention, no other case has caught the public imagination in the same way as Nirbhaya. In fact, there are signs that India’s English-language press may be reflecting a less sympathetic view toward rape victims. A data analysis of the term “false rape” (where a victim withdrew their claim before or during prosecution) shows a small but significant rise in reports on this issue since 2012.

Journalists have attributed this rise to the persistent Indian narrative that women are prone to file false cases when they have been caught having a sexual relationship outside marriage, let down after a promise of marriage, pursuing a personal vendetta, or trying to extort money.

Although the coverage of the Delhi gang rape showed that Indian English-language newspapers were prepared to report on and highlight the issue of sexual violence, much could be done to improve how publications tackle this issue. There could be better press regulation to prevent salacious and sensationalized coverage, greater sensitivity in reporting, the inclusion of non-PLU cases, the appointment of specially focused gender reporters, and the reframing of rape from a lust crime to a political, economic, and social phenomenon. Although rape is now news in the Indian press, it may take many years before this issue is given the sustained and enlightened attention it deserves.

Source: Adapted from Joanna Jolly, “Rape Culture in India: The Role of the English Language Press,” July 2016, <https://shorensteincenter.org/rape-culture-india-english-language-press/>.

Press output inevitably represents a small, unsystematic, and unrepresentative sample of the news of the day. In that sense, every issue of a newspaper and every television newscast is biased. Published stories often generate follow-up coverage, heightening the bias effect. Attempts to be evenhanded may lead to similar coverage for events of dissimilar importance, thereby introducing bias. For example, as we learned in earlier chapters, environmentalists have

complained that the quest for balanced news has skewed the coverage of information about global warming. “By giving equal time to opposing views, these newspapers [*New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Wall Street Journal*] significantly downplayed scientific understanding of the role humans play in global warming. . . . When generally agreed-upon scientific findings are presented side-by-side with the viewpoints of a handful of skeptics, readers are poorly served.”<sup>6</sup>

When news is evaluated from the standpoint of the audience’s preference, rather than as a mirror image of society or as a reflection of socially and politically significant events, media gatekeepers appear to be doing well. People like the products of the mass media industry well enough to devote huge chunks of their leisure time to broadcasts and the Internet. Millions of viewers, by their own free choice, watch shows condemned as “trash” by social critics and often even by the viewers themselves. These same people ignore shows and newspaper stories with the critics’ seal of approval. Most claim to enjoy broadcast news and to gain important information from it.<sup>7</sup>

### Putting Criticism into Perspective

Most of the concerns voiced by critics of the news media have been echoed in the pages of this book. Nonetheless, the evidence does not support a blanket indictment of the media for failure to serve the public well and give audiences what they want, as well as what they need, as citizens.<sup>8</sup> First and foremost, the collective noun *news media* covers a broad range of institutions. It does not refer only to newspapers, newsmagazines, television, radio, and the Internet as news media types; it also refers to individual news suppliers within these broad categories. There is a wide gulf between the broad sweep of global news offered by the *New York Times*, on one hand, and the scores of tabloids and small-town newspapers that highlight local society news, on the other. U.S. media contain much journalistic wheat along with generous portions of chaff, and the proportions vary widely in individual media. In fact, any citizen willing to make the effort can find essential current information more readily in the Internet age than ever before, especially in the legacy media’s Internet versions.<sup>9</sup> Those versions even include the views of citizen pundits along with the commentary of professionals.

Any fair indictment of the news media must consider mitigating circumstances. This does not mean that the charges are invalid; it means that they must be put into context to assess the degree of guilt. Critics should consider the pressures under which journalists do their work under both normal and crisis conditions. Among them, the necessity to produce profits for the parent organization is paramount. It accounts for excesses of negativism and voyeur journalism. Other stresses arise from journalistic values and the conventions of news production. For example, the zeal to rush to publication with breaking news fosters mistakes and misinterpretations; the beat system privileges newsworthy events occurring on regular beats over important happenings that

occur beyond these beats; pack journalism homogenizes criteria for news selection, so most media become rivals in conformity.

Economic developments have heightened pressures. The multiplication of readily accessible news channels in the United States and elsewhere has forced electronic as well as print media to compete more fiercely for audiences and advertisers. Shrinking profit margins in individual enterprises have forced cutbacks in staff that put additional workloads on the remaining employees. Rich databases have grown exponentially and could be mined to enrich the context for stories. Sadly, the time available to individual reporters to search them has shrunk. However, some news organizations are dedicating more resources to database searching for important news stories. The traditional media find their news turf eroded by the new media's ability to publish breaking stories instantly. Accordingly, print media must abandon the lure of featuring freshly breaking news and attract audiences in other ways. But when they turn to more analytical and interpretive reporting, they are accused of improperly straying into the terrain of editorial commentary. The upshot has been that the public increasingly perceives newspaper reporting as unduly biased.

Finally, judging complaints about the media requires a historical perspective. We have been living in a period when regard for most major institutions in the United States is at a low ebb. When people were asked in 2012 how much they enjoyed following the news, only 20 percent confessed to little or no enjoyment.<sup>10</sup> The 2016 election cycle prompted many Americans to profess being exhausted and overwhelmed by the amount of campaign news, while not feeling very informed by it. Media trust is at historic lows, and politicians are more aggressively campaigning against the press. History also shows that politicians and the general public are fickle in their condemnations as well as in their praise. The founders of our nation were the first to carp, on the one hand, about its venal, lying press and the first to agree, on the other, that warts and all, it was the bedrock on which democratic freedoms rest.

### Specialized Media

Hundreds of specialized media address information needs that are neglected or poorly served by the regular media. They are a partial antidote to the general mass media's failure to cover many important groups and issues. One example is the expanding role of ethnic media; they provide an abundance of detailed news about the many regions from which U.S. immigrants hail and offer different perspectives. Other types of specialized media flourish as well. For example, numerous professional and trade journals, newsletters, and websites concentrate on subjects such as religion, sports, fine and popular arts, automobiles, health, and animal welfare. Some specialized media, such as the *Nation*, *Mother Jones*, or the *Weekly Standard*—or the *Huffington Post* and the *Drudge Report* on the Internet—are primarily devoted to political commentary inspired by diverse ideological perspectives. Others, such as the *Onion*, parts of the *New Yorker*, and John Oliver's *Last Week Tonight* on television excel in

humorous or satirical analyses. The arrival and proliferation of digital communication technologies has enabled many special interest groups to voice their views about controversial political issues. These groups can now reach widely dispersed audiences. Environmental groups have been able to expand their membership, reach, and influence enormously this way, as have fringe parties and candidates.

The demand for targeted information has spawned thousands of magazines in the United States. Cable channels are multiplying, and specialized websites have mushroomed exponentially. Specialized media also encompass the politically radical, iconoclastic, and counterculture media that flourish in times of social and political stress, such as the late 1960s and early 1970s. These media feature the flagrant opposition to government policy that is permitted in the United States but often forbidden in other countries. At the height of underground press popularity, during the Vietnam War era and its aftermath, readership was estimated at 10 million. The rise of the underground print and electronic press during troubled times demonstrates that mass media can be started and operated with modest means. Like most alternative media, the counterculture media of the 1960s were financed through small-scale local advertising and through classified ads. Staffs were paid meager salaries or no salaries at all.<sup>11</sup> At one time there were nearly 1,000 underground newspapers and 400 counterculture radio stations. Such vitality attests to the vigor and flexibility of the mass media system.<sup>12</sup> The abrupt decline of underground media with the end of the Vietnam War also shows that the system is able to prune its unneeded branches when demand ends.

Waning public support rather than official censorship led to the steep decline in this genre of journalism. It has been revived with the advent of the Internet, where thousands of vitriolic antigovernment sites urge opposition to established authorities and their policies and often suggest ways to implement radical ideas. Authoritarian governments seek to suppress these information channels, while our own government worries about the role digital media play in the recruitment of terrorists. Mao Tse-tung's admonition to "let a thousand flowers bloom," ignored in China, has come to fruition on the U.S. alternative media scene. However, given the explosive growth of electronic soapboxes from which citizens can broadcast their views, the competition for attention has become extraordinarily fierce.

### Public Broadcast Stations

Yet another issue brought to the fore by the age of media plenty and criticism of media services is the fate of public broadcasting. As discussed in chapter 2, public television was organized to provide an alternative to the typical programming available on the three commercial networks that were the sole providers of televised news at the time. Many political leaders—predominantly conservative—would like to abandon it and save the costs of public subsidies. They point out that the number of networks has grown, and cable television and the Internet

provide infinitely more variety of programming than existed at the midpoint of the twentieth century. Although some portion of public broadcast programming is geared to minorities, disadvantaged groups are not the primary audience for its programming. Instead, public broadcasting audiences tend to be relatively well educated, well-to-do, and, aside from those who watch the children's programs, quite small. Some on the political right have claimed the audience runs more heavily left of center on the political spectrum, and there is criticism that government subsidies are directed toward this audience.

Proponents of keeping the public broadcasting system alive argue that it still fills an important need that merits public support. Poor families need access to the rich cultural programs that are a hallmark of public television. They cannot afford to pay for access to the likes of the History, Discovery, Learning, and National Geographic channels, which cover important realms of information in depth. Because sophisticated cultural and educational programming attracts only small audiences, it is unlikely that the other free television channels will feature such fare in the future, even when digital technology increases the number of available channels.<sup>13</sup> The difficulty of keeping the public broadcasting system solvent without government subsidy may sound its death knell (though at present only a small percentage is funded by government). The European practice of funding public broadcasting principally through consumer fees has never been considered a realistic option in the United States,<sup>14</sup> though funds raised from voluntary subscribers and donors constitute the major part of its funding.



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## THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES

The age of personalized mass media has arrived. Political scientist W. Russell Neuman predicted this development at the start of the 1990s when he pointed out that we now "have the opportunity to design a new electronic and optical network that will blur the distinction between mass and interpersonal communications. . . . A single high capacity digital network will combine computing, telephony, broadcasting, motion pictures and publishing."<sup>15</sup> But Neuman also warned that the provocative predictions that are apt to follow new technologies generally are off the mark because they ignore the human context that determines if, how, and when new technologies will be used. As Neuman sees it, "Technology does not determine, but it can make a difference."<sup>16</sup>

Six features of the new technologies have the potential for generating major political changes:

1. The advent of nonprofessional citizen journalism that competes with traditional journalism
2. The digitally enabled interactivity tools that have created a new global public sphere
3. The leveling of barriers to communication created by time, space, and political constraints
4. The multiplication of communication channels that has created a hypercompetitive media world
5. The modernization of legacy journalism
6. The growth of new approaches for financing the creation and distribution of news

### Citizen Journalism and User-Generated Content

If citizens had their choice, how would they reshape the news media? Answering that question is no longer a counterfactual exercise because news-ranking sites such as Digg and Reddit keep track of the stories that their members favor. Moreover, countless people have become amateur reporters, whose work has been published on their own websites or on host websites, including the sites of professional news providers. Systematic studies of the content of citizen-generated news offerings are scarce. One example, a five-day study of several news-ranking sites conducted in June 2007, found that Digg users focused on the release of Apple's new iPhone, while the mainstream media focused on ongoing debates about immigration policies. The Iraq War accounted for 10 percent of the stories in the mainstream media during that period, compared with 1 percent of the stories that the users of ranking sites preferred.

This sliver of evidence suggests that the public's news choice principle seems to be news that people can use in daily life, rather than news that has broad

political significance. Besides the difference in topic selection, citizen-generated news diverged from mainstream media in the choice of sources for stories. Citizen reporters selected sources offering citizen-generated content, such as YouTube or blogs by non-journalists. Most excluded audience postings, aside from featuring comments on their stories.<sup>17</sup> Professional journalists featured a much broader and weightier political news diet and relied more on government officials, expert witnesses, and their own research. One can disagree about the respective merits of professional and nonprofessional reporting, but if airing information about complex political issues is important in a democracy, citizen media apparently are a poor alternative to the mainstream media—certainly for the most part.

Online videos and social networking sites are other alternative news sources that are dominated by nonprofessionals. The most prominent ones attract huge audiences each month. According to digital analytics firm comScore, in January 2016 Facebook's U.S. audience topped 207 million users, LinkedIn's topped 119 million, Twitter's topped 118 million, and Google Sites had a combined audience of more than 245 million unique U.S. visitors.<sup>18</sup> Along with YouTube, these sites offer citizen-generated news to their audiences. However, they also draw heavily on news from traditional media or provide links to them, along with viewers' comments.

Millions of Americans whose identities are unknown now post their views on Internet sites where other people can read them, comment about them, and pass them on to still others. Anyone, at little cost and with no training in news collection and verification, can produce content and post any message, true or false. Ordinary people as content producers are not bound by journalistic criteria such as accuracy, objectivity, fairness, and balance. There is practically no form of censorship, governmental or private, on the Internet, nor are there requirements for ensuring transparency or accountability.

The upshot is a flourishing marketplace of disparate views—far richer than ever before. Thanks to links, citizen news sites often provide more background information and more access to diverse points of view than other venues. However, a small fraction of their stories are originals; the remainder come from the pool of stories available from traditional news sources.<sup>19</sup>

Some user-generated content has contributed to the public dialogue and even spawned significant political action. Examples are the vivid, firsthand accounts in which bloggers and citizen journalists described the horrors of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and inspired audiences to help the victims. Many of their stories received wide attention because traditional media used them as part of their own reporting. Non-professionals have unearthed important stories that the media increasingly miss because the ranks of professional journalists are thinner than ever. Other sites have become megaphones for spreading dangerous falsehoods, often without the antidote of counterarguments that is common in mainstream media.

Many online messages, of course, fall by the wayside. For example, though a lot of websites attract millions of unique visitors, many have high

“bounce rates,” meaning that users remain on the page only for a second or two. Given the growth of social networking sites and YouTube's continued success, more members of the public than ever are exposed to various forms of user-generated content. Obviously, the right and opportunity to share one's views with the world are limited by the right and opportunity of potential audiences to ignore most messages. When Americans turn to the Web for news, 80 percent of their visits are to brand-name newspaper, television, and search engine sites because they are deemed more trustworthy than other websites. Table 14-1 makes that clear; it shows the audience numbers for the top news websites, where Yahoo News and CNN lead the pack. Alternatively, audience reach for many, if not most, Web-native news sites is tiny. Citizens have characterized the Internet as the most up-to-date medium, the easiest to use, and the most enjoyable. Despite such high praise, television has remained their first choice for news, but the growth of social media as a source for news means digital media may soon surpass television as the most widely used source. During the 2016 presidential campaign, which aroused tremendous public interest, 78 percent of the audience relied primarily on television, 65 percent relied on the digital forms of news, and only 36 percent named newspapers as their primary news source.<sup>20</sup>

Is user-generated content, then, a dream or a nightmare? The answer is that it is a bit of both for the public, for news media professionals, and for American democracy. Fortunately or unfortunately, effects that run simultaneously in opposite directions are common in the evolving media scene and account for widely divergent appraisals by experts and publics. When it comes to the digital media environment, the public benefits from a richer marketplace of ideas, but it is harmed when messages are based on misinformation or deliberate deception, sometimes fueled by hate. News professionals benefit from user-contributed content when the pool of ideas from which they can select their stories is enriched, particularly when the new voices cover unique slices of reality from fresh, previously unheard sources. But journalists and citizens suffer when stories of questionable newsworthiness dominate the news agenda and force journalists to focus on them at the expense of covering more important news.

Journalists typically express mixed feelings about the impact of the Internet on traditional news values. Back in 2007, roughly half thought the Internet would strengthen these values, while half thought the opposite. The strengths mentioned included more transparency because more eyes are scrutinizing the political scene and lengthier, more detailed coverage of specific events. The weaknesses mentioned were insufficient quality control, use of sources with unproven reliability records, and increased time pressures in the 24/7 cycle, leading to sloppy reporting.<sup>21</sup> As we reported in earlier chapters, journalists attribute current shortcomings in their work to the need to constantly worry about the “bottom line,” which, unfortunately, is tied tightly to economic competition exacerbated by the arrival and proliferation of the Internet.

**TABLE 14-1 Websites Cited as Top Destinations for News (in millions, unique visitors)**

Digital News Source	Total Digital Population	Desktop	Mobile
Yahoo-ABC News	127,995	59,099	93,160
CNN Network	101,540	53,544	64,632
NBC News Digital	101,145	42,207	69,810
Huffington Post	100,000	44,184	67,095
CBS News	84,153	36,431	58,303
USA Today	78,804	37,718	50,195
BuzzFeed	77,992	22,749	57,724
New York Times	57,132	29,013	34,802
Fox News Digital Network	56,857	28,091	35,406
Mail Online/Daily Mail	51,181	21,153	33,844

Source: Michael Suh, "Top Digital News Entities," April 28, 2015, <http://www.journalism.org/chart/top-digital-news-entities>. Data are from January 2015, provided to Pew by comScore Media Metrix.

Note: Total digital population is the unduplicated combination of the desktop and mobile traffic figures. Mobile includes browsers and apps. Desktop and mobile figures combined may exceed the total digital population number.

### The Fruits of Interactivity

Interactivity is an extremely important feature of the digital era. The stream of information about ongoing events is no longer one-directional, with news media voices doing all the talking and the audience, like dutiful children, listening silently. The new technologies permit audiences to use Internet channels to talk back to message senders, asking questions and providing new information and fresh comments. Many news providers, including traditional media, encourage feedback. Millions of people have voiced their ideas, and a few of those ideas have aroused some public attention and dialogue. But many more millions of citizens—the "silent majorities" of the Nixon era—have remained mute.

The Internet, as an open-access megaphone, has diminished the traditional news media's tight control over access to mass audiences. Individuals and groups who were virtually barred from access to traditional media platforms—labor unions, candidates for local political offices, and animal rights groups are examples—now have viable channels to target receptive audiences. Modest resources are no longer a barrier to individuals and groups who want to reach audiences widely dispersed throughout the United

States and most other parts of the world. Moreover, they can shape the messages freely, deciding what is acceptable and credible and what is not, because the Internet, unlike most other news transmission venues, is largely free from censorship.

The Internet has turned out to be an excellent tool to rally supporters for specific causes and raise money. Students have used it to mobilize death penalty opponents when an execution was imminent; political and citizen groups have used it to gather support for recall elections. Politicians who have felt victimized by journalists boiling their comments down to meaningless nuggets can now customize their messages and send them quickly, easily, and cheaply to specific populations. Additionally, e-mails and websites can be used to raise staggering amounts of money. During the 2016 presidential contest, Donald J. Trump raised more than \$280 million from individual donors in small donations of \$200 or less, presumably through the Web.<sup>22</sup> Liberal websites such as MoveOn.org helped to recruit campaign workers, organize campaign rallies, and mobilize Democratic voters. Conservative websites energized citizens on the other side of the political fence.

Digital technologies make it possible for audiences tuning in to talk shows on radio and television to interact instantaneously with others who are listening to or watching the same programs. Dual-screening, for example, is a trending use of digital media for news consumption and a perfect example of the hybrid nature of our media system, as described in chapter 4.<sup>23</sup> The boom in interactive communication over long distances offers the promise that every American, regardless of expertise, can have a voice in the nation's political life. Undoubtedly the opportunity is there, but the reality remains far from the ideal. The people whose voices are heard in technology-enabled interactions predominantly are members of the upper crust: well educated, successful, confident, and economically secure. Most people who fall below these socioeconomic levels have not given public voice to their views and may or may not in the future. Still, interactivity is a good thing because it has expanded the number of voices in the public sphere. Thus far, small interest groups that lack the resources to pay for public relations agents or lobbyists have probably been the main beneficiaries.

### Do-It-Yourself News and On-Demand Consumption

Before the advent of the Internet, news professionals had full control over news dissemination, aside from the constraints imposed by the social, political, and economic environment. Journalists chose the news that would be reported, they framed it to suit their professional goals, and they disseminated it via print media and broadcasts run on schedules that they selected, albeit with some considerations of audience preferences. News consumers had to adjust to these schedules and accept the news offerings that various providers had concocted. It was a take-it-or-leave-it situation.

That scenario has changed drastically, so people now can consume news whenever they want it, around the clock and seven days and nights each week. Researchers are still trying to gauge whether this flexibility amounts to little more than a nice convenience or is a major benefit because people whose schedules previously barred them from receiving news can now access it. Perhaps more important, the greater flexibility of access to the news allows citizens to graze among a variety of news outlets, picking and choosing entire programs or specific stories as they wish; they can even assemble their own news packages manually or arrange to have them assembled electronically. They can use RSS (Rich Site Summary) feeds that deliver regularly changing Web content to keep up with the latest developments in a particular field, such as banking policy, or a specific topic, such as rescue efforts after an aircraft disaster. They can use news-ranking sites like Reddit or Digg to check what news their peers are watching and then join them, becoming a shared-news community.

Mobile devices, which have become an essential piece of equipment for most Americans, have further reduced barriers of space and time. One no longer must be physically present at a place with computer access to tune in to the news. One can capture it via one's cell phone at any time and at any place. Again, the scope of opportunities to stay in touch with people and events and interact with them boggles the imagination. We do know that mobile access, for example, provides Internet access to some who would not otherwise have it. However, we also know the mobile platform is not ideal for news seeking and engagement.<sup>24</sup> The reality is that only a small portion of the public actually uses these new opportunities to become more informed about public life and contribute to it.<sup>25</sup>

The proliferation of news venues and the ability to customize news packages to suit news consumers' individual tastes have important downsides along with their benefits. Among them, the fragmentation issue looms large. Will the lack of a shared-news supply fragment the nation's political consensus? When people rely primarily on specialized broadcasts, will their attention to politics diminish?<sup>26</sup> As discussed in chapter 11, in the past nationwide dissemination of similar news fostered shared political socialization. When news becomes fragmented, people are more likely to be socialized in disparate ways. What will be the consequences? Many citizens may become prisoners of their special interests and miss out on happenings in the broader culture. The country may be carved up into mutually exclusive, often hostile political enclaves.<sup>27</sup>

Not everyone fears that fragmentation of the broadcast audience will lead to political balkanization.<sup>28</sup> Many people point out that the national consensus was not ruptured when alternative media were used in the past. They argue that fragmented interests create the demand for fragmented media, rather than the reverse. If there is political and social consensus, people will seek out information pertaining to the larger community. Others point out that commercially oriented media are unifiers because they will always try to attract large

audiences by offering programs with wide appeal. That is why programming on cable television became uniform and similar to network television. Even if the new media increase political and social fragmentation, many people do not find that prospect objectionable, believing that pluralism is preferable to earlier melting-pot ideals.

### Platform Multiplication

Most people can receive Internet messages and broadcast their own at relatively low cost. The Web, with its wide open, relatively inexpensive, minimally regulated access features, has encouraged the creation of a multiplicity of different types of channels and services. The vast number of available channels expands the range of news that can be covered and instantaneously transmitted. For this reason, the Internet presents the stiffest competitive threat to traditional over-the-air and cable television. It duplicates many of their news and entertainment offerings and guides people to other information sources by listing links to other relevant websites that are just one click away. Increasingly popular streaming services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Hulu compound the competitive troubles brought by digital, especially as younger cohorts engage in cord-cutting behaviors, opting to rely on streaming services alone.

Some observers bemoan the fact that the role of professional journalists as selectors and framers of news has been undercut by lay news consumers' ability to perform these tasks themselves, albeit inexpertly. Others hail the weakening of the traditional media. News consumers, they say, have been relieved of the tyranny of the press, in which unelected journalists could determine what became news and frame it in ways that suited their own purposes better than the audience's goals. These critics claim that citizen-generated news is likely to yield a better fit between audience needs and the messages that reach them. Government programs may operate more successfully when officials can use two-way channels and direct their messages to specific audiences.

Contrary to earlier forecasts, the multiplication of news providers did not immediately split off large chunks of the traditional media's audience. The reason is twofold. Most important, the traditional media have become a major presence on the Web, using an assortment of Internet channels to transmit their news products. In the newspaper field, many major papers have more readers for their Web version than for their traditional "hard"—that is, paper—copies. Second, in the earlier battle for audiences, the traditional media had the advantage of being known and trusted, though this trust is eroding as audiences increasingly perceive bias in the news. Recent years have witnessed a gradual eroding of network news audience as well as significant numbers of local newspaper deaths. Despite the fact that the majority of Internet offerings, like the messages dispatched by millions of blogs, initially failed to establish trust, some Web-native arrivals to the media scene have overcome the trust hurdle and are heavily used sources for news. High audience numbers have



been their reward. Examples include Yahoo, Google, MSNBC, CNN, the *Huffington Post*, the *Drudge Report*, Facebook, and Twitter.

The political consequences of the multiplication of news providers have been substantial, although observers measure them with various scales and therefore disagree about their magnitude and significance. Most important, the store of information provided by news radio, television, cable, and digital channels, by communication satellites and by round-the-clock news programs, offers an unrivaled diversity of news.<sup>29</sup> Small communities with limited information sources can now readily escape from their communication ghettos by turning to the Internet. Although they are unlikely to find news outlets with information about their local community,<sup>30</sup> digital communication technologies can supply an assortment of major newspapers to the citizens who seek them. Similarly, cable television systems offer programs across hundreds of separate channels. That increases choice for consumers, which means many will choose one of many entertainment options over news. Public access cable channels and government websites can keep citizens in closer touch with public institutions and political leaders. Local television stations and consumers with access to satellite dishes can tap into satellite news directly or via other carriers. Public and private groups can rent space from the satellites' owners and use it for electronic transmissions.

However, the impression of a widely used, rich menu of choices is often more a mirage than reality because there is an informal concentration of control over the news supply. It springs from American news consumers' preference for news from brand-name media. When audiences turn to brand-name media for most of their news and Internet news organizations do the same, the pool from which the thousands of news channels feed is small indeed. What all of this means for individuals and organizations and political life in specific situations is still unclear. Besides, technology remains in flux and offers new products at an amazing pace. Some, like Twitter, become instantly popular, and others die on the vine or after a brief life. The changing mix of news providers, channels, and programs, therefore, makes most analyses of the full impact of new technologies stale by the time they have been completed, or even earlier.<sup>31</sup>

### Transforming Journalism

Without a doubt, the Internet has reduced the power and influence of traditional media, which no longer enjoy a near-monopoly over news production and distribution. They share the control of news with nonprofessional providers. Their power to control the flow of news to and from various world regions has also eroded because the Internet empowers American news consumers to access news from all parts of the world. Moreover, the multiplication of news sources is a global phenomenon.

The mainstream traditional media's diminished control over the audience pool is partly compensated by news improvements. Thanks to the new technologies, traditional news media have made noteworthy advances on three

fronts: news gathering, news processing, and news dissemination. Access to computer databases and satellites has put an enormous store of usable information within reach of journalists wherever they may be. Even foreign countries kept off-limits by hostile rulers can be explored by satellite, as can remote areas of the globe and even the private retreats of powerful elites. The ability to search databases electronically for specific bits of information and to combine those data in a variety of ways opens up countless new possibilities for creating news stories and providing valuable contextual information for fast-moving current developments.

When it comes to the distribution of news gathered in far-flung locations, the array of channels for immediate or delayed transmission has multiplied far beyond the range deemed possible in the late twentieth century. Local stations can now import video footage from satellites and thereby eliminate their dependence on national network programming and vastly expand their programming options. Broadband technology has made Internet use far more attractive because it allows nearly instant, constant access without the delays and hassles of a modem. Information available on the Web reaches journalists faster, from more diverse sources, and in modes that allow reporters to question sources quickly with the expectation of a prompt response. The potential for producing excellent news therefore has grown by leaps and bounds, which is a welcome benefit for news consumers everywhere.

New broadcasting and narrowcasting technologies generate problems along with their benefits. Even as these technologies have improved news production capabilities, the cost-cutting newsrooms have endured may offset the news improvements. Newsroom staffs are shrinking all over the country, and ranks of foreign bureaus are now the exception rather than the rule for major news organizations. And there is, as yet, no widely available solution to the problem of finding one's way through the Internet's lush jungles of information, where search engines such as Google and Yahoo provide only limited guidance.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the stock of information that requires searching doubles every few months. For most news consumers, journalists therefore remain essential because they are trained to ferret out what seems "most important" within a particular cultural milieu and present it in language that average people can understand. As mentioned before, news aggregating sites that list each day's most popular stories, as well as social networks and other websites that present summaries of the day's most important news, have become active competitors in determining what should be on the daily news agenda.

A major problem exacerbated by the new technologies concerns the safeguarding of individual privacy. Ever-smaller cameras and microphones permit reporters to spy with little chance of detection. Professional and lay reporters can assemble scattered bits of historical and current information in seconds to derive a comprehensive, publishable portrait of any individual who has caught public attention or is likely to do so. Silly comments posted on Facebook can impact a person's career prospects. Unless individual privacy becomes more

fully protected, the digital age could well turn into an Orwellian nightmare—with individuals living in glass cages, exposed to instant public scrutiny by all sorts of paparazzi reporters. Likewise, the new information-gathering techniques make it far more difficult to protect national security information from prying eyes and communication intervention, such as the Russian government's attempts to interfere with the 2016 presidential election. Congress and the courts have been unable to strike a sound balance between press freedom and national security.

### New Ways to Pay for News

The decline in readers, viewers, and listeners brought about by audience defections to the Internet has plunged the legacy media into serious financial difficulties. This is particularly the case for the print media, where bankruptcies became common during the recession that started in 2007. Many newspapers went out of business entirely; others cut back on the number of publication days, and still others abandoned their hard copy operations and published Web versions only. Nearly all companies, including flagship enterprises, cut staff, reduced the scope of news gathering, and replaced hard news with cheaper, softer news in hopes of retaining their dwindling audiences. Still, profits continued to plunge. The financial shocks have led to reconsideration of the main financial underpinnings of the private sector press in the United States, based on the firm belief that the news values of old-style journalism must survive.

First a look at the traditional financial structures: The pillars of financing for a profit-reliant press have been advertiser support, audience payments, and government subsidies. Each has different policy consequences, which become blurred when they are used in combination, as is common. Print media, for example, have been financed by the price audiences pay for newspapers and, more important, by revenue from advertisers. They have also received government subsidies in the form of below-cost mailing rates.

The revenue system fell apart when earnings from advertising, which are pegged to audience size, plunged as audiences defected to the Internet. Some advertisers also defected to Internet outlets but never in large enough numbers to make advertising a financial pillar for online information providers. In fact, outlets with small audiences, or audiences that are unattractive to advertisers because they represent small markets, may never be able to attract enough sponsors to pay for their operations. That then raises questions about who, in the long run, will pay for the expenses of website news operations, especially if they strive for excellence. Good journalism is expensive. What will happen if the alternative—reliance on unpaid, unskilled, and unaccountable amateurs—proves unacceptable in the long run? More recently, several prominent news organizations have begun charging for access to their digital content. Configurations of the pricing and delivery methods vary widely, and there is little evidence as yet about which of these new business models will prove successful.

To cope with reduced revenues, traditional media have tried to cut costs in various ways. These include news-sharing arrangements and combining multiplatform operations, like those arranged between NBC, MSNBC, the Washington Post Company, and *Newsweek*.<sup>33</sup> As mentioned, the legacy networks also expanded into their own Web enterprises, so the same news production operation can serve traditional and new media platforms. Journalism training has changed accordingly, forcing new graduates to become adept in handling traditional and emerging formats.

Most new media broadcast facilities, along with cable television, rely heavily on audience payments. These have generally taken the form of monthly service charges for programs, plus installation or equipment charges. Additional programming may be available for a flat monthly rate or on a per-program basis. Service-charge financing for broadcasting has become accepted abroad. In the United States, however, it initially met with resistance because good broadcast services were available everywhere free of charge. By the mid-1980s much of the initial resistance to paying for broadcasts had vanished. Many U.S. households were paying for special programs in addition to their standard monthly fees.

A major social drawback of service charges for broadcasts is that poor families who need many of the specialized programs are unable to pay for them. Middle-income families, who already enjoy many social advantages, benefit most from the information resources available through new media platforms; low-income people who lack access fall further behind.<sup>34</sup> The problem can be reduced through government subsidies paid to cable and Internet companies or directly to the poor. Direct payment to citizens seems preferable in that it avoids making media enterprises financially dependent on the government and thereby hampering their freedom of action.

The need for a new business model is clear when the I-beam of media financing—advertising money—no longer bears the load of expenses for news production and distribution and when people below middle-class economic status cannot afford service charges for news and entertainment. Newspapers have tried to stop the hemorrhaging in novel ways because a single hard copy reader is the financial equivalent of two or three dozen website readers.<sup>35</sup> Lures to retain hard copy readers have included launching tabloid sections aimed at specialized audiences or offering youth-oriented versions that are given away free of charge at public transportation stops.

Another possibility for financing hard copy newspapers is reversion to the nineteenth-century model of a partisan press. That means that political parties or other political sponsors would support news media operations, most likely as nonprofit enterprises. Judging by past history and by the experience of similar systems abroad, this approach leads to a high degree of political polarization. It also can lead to political paralysis because citizens living on incompatible information diets find it difficult to reach consensus. Given the current polarized state of our politics, many would see a move in this direction as quite

worrisome. Nevertheless, it may be a trade worth considering if the other option is insufficient news for keeping the public informed.

Other models for financing old and new media operations are government financing or financing by privately controlled foundations such as the Knight Foundation, help in news production from university centers such as those at Columbia University or Northwestern University, and grants from individual philanthropists such as billionaire George Soros. Another model that has been tried for investigative journalism involves the creation of free-standing research centers that employ professional reporters to cover particular types of news. Examples are the Center for Public Integrity in Washington, D.C., and New York-based ProPublica. Such centers can be run in a way similar to their predecessor, the Associated Press, which operates as a membership association. Payment of a membership fee entitles the member organization to use AP news reports. Instead of using membership fees, news-gathering associations, which usually are nonprofits, can also be run by private entrepreneurs or by foundations. Their products can be available for a fee, or they can be distributed free of charge. Such organizations can also produce particular stories on demand for news organizations that lack the resources to do the necessary work on their own. Regardless of the source of financial support, the financial supporters are likely to influence the thrust of the news product to some degree. That becomes an important consideration in deciding which model for financing high-quality news is best for preserving the independence of the press—be it the control methods of the past, the Internet free-for-all model of citizen journalism, a government or nonprofit subsidized model, some form of subscription for access to news websites or payment for individual articles, or a mixture of several of these.

## REGULATION AS A BARRIER TO DEVELOPMENT

A number of psychological, political, and economic barriers commonly block the swift and full development of new mass communication technologies. Cable television's rocky history in the United States illustrates many of the obstacles that technical innovations face. It also illustrates the controversial political decisions that must be made to fit a new information technology into existing legislative and administrative structures. When cable television first became available in 1949, established broadcasters viewed it as dangerous competition that would steal their audiences and pirate their programs. When satellite technology evolved, apprehension mounted. The television networks feared ruin if stations could pick up programs directly from satellites and broadcast them nationwide via cable television.

The Federal Communications Commission's (FCC's) initial response to cable technology was typical. To protect existing stakeholders, the commission passed rules that sharply limited the types of programs that cable television stations could broadcast whenever these offerings competed with established

network services. Consequently, the growth of the cable industry was stunted. The regulations were eased some twenty years later when the FCC accepted the cable advocates' claim that cable technology was needed because it could reach people in locations inaccessible to regular television signals.

Most new communication technologies initially face very costly regulations designed to force them to serve hitherto unmet public needs. For example, the FCC asked the cable industry to offer a minimum of twenty channels, including outlets for the general public, educational institutions, and local governments. It was also required to carry signals of local broadcasters. It took a series of costly lawsuits to end these burdensome requirements.<sup>36</sup> The industry achieved its goal of breaking the regulation barriers with the passage of the Cable Communications Policy Act of 1984.<sup>37</sup> The act deregulated rates and made renewal of cable franchises nearly automatic in areas with ready access to over-the-air television—roughly 90 percent of the cabled areas.

Meanwhile, the resistance of the established industries to this new competition had softened. Heeding the old adage "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em," a number of over-the-air broadcasters invested heavily in cable facilities once the FCC eased controls regarding cross-ownership and admitted the networks to the cable market. By 1993 broadcasters fully or partially controlled nearly half (47 percent) of the top fifty cable systems; newspaper and magazine publishers participated in one-third (34 percent).<sup>38</sup> Media conglomerates owned the three largest cable news outlets: CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC.

Despite all the obstacles, the cable television saga demonstrates that major innovations are possible in a government system built deliberately to slow down change and allow minorities to block unwanted developments. Technological advances and their political fallout will continue, but most major changes, much of the time, will develop at a very gradual pace.

## Regulatory Options

How, if at all, should government regulate the news media to ensure that the liberty of the press does not become a license for socially harmful behaviors? The explosive growth of unregulated information channels on the Internet makes it necessary to raise that perennial question once again.<sup>39</sup> The wisdom of the current regulations that apply to legacy over-the-air broadcast systems also remains hotly disputed.

Governments have several broad policy options for dealing with broadcasting systems. First, they can adopt hands-off, laissez-faire policies, allowing market forces and private owners' preferences to dominate development.<sup>40</sup> The U.S. government has adopted the laissez-faire philosophy for print media but not for over-the-air television. The initial rationale for regulating television was the fact that transmission channels were scarce, so government had to protect fairness of access to the channels. It also had to ensure that these prime sources of information conveyed essential messages to the public in politically correct formats.

If one believes that government should regulate information supply only when transmission channels are scarce, as happened with early radio and television, then it makes sense to leave the current rich crop of information transmission systems unregulated. When broadcast and narrowcast outlets are plentiful, market forces presumably come into play, so necessary services will be supplied in a far more flexible way than is possible when government regulations intervene. The only restraints that may be needed are safeguards to protect national security and maintain social norms and privacy. *Laissez-faire* is the mantra of deregulation proponents.

Second, information transmission systems can be treated as common carriers, like the telephone or rail and bus lines. Common carrier status makes transmission facilities available to everyone on a first-come, first-served basis. Cable broadcast stations, and later the Internet, were classified as common carriers of information, rather than as creators of information whose messages had to be monitored to guarantee a rich information supply for all sectors of the American public. Owners of cable facilities presumably did not broadcast their own programs. Rather, they leased their channels to various broadcasters for fees regulated by government or by market forces. Under common carrier rules, they could not selectively exclude any programs.

The FCC and many local governments like the common carrier concept. Even though the U.S. Supreme Court decided in 1979 that cable systems could not be considered common carriers under federal law, Congress and some state and local governments have treated the industry as a common carrier.<sup>41</sup> When Congress ordered cable systems to broadcast all local over-the-air programs, the industry brought suit. It won judgments in 1985 and again in 1987 that the “must carry rule” violated the First Amendment rights of cable companies.<sup>42</sup> The victory for cable systems was a defeat for champions of broad public access rights to the media. In sum, the application of common carrier rules has been confusing because the substance of the rules is disputed. Cable systems have become a poorly defined, mixed breed that resembles over-the-air television in some ways and traditional common carriers in others. By comparison, the Internet system has historically been subject to very few rules, in part because it is deemed a common carrier and in part because its nature and structure make enforcement of regulations extremely difficult. The Obama years were characterized by debates about regulating the Internet. Some camps favor total net neutrality and the avoidance of regulating things like the amount broadband companies can charge for services, others maintain that the Internet is now so essential for education, emergency information and services, and public affairs information that it should be regulated as a utility. In 2015, the FCC passed regulations to prevent companies from charging higher rates for faster “lanes” of Internet traffic, a movement toward regulation. Opponents to the change warn it is a move toward government control of the Internet, proponents maintain the rules are essential to ensure open access to the Internet for everyone.<sup>43</sup>

Third, the government can confer public trustee status on communication enterprises. Owners then have full responsibility for programming but are required to meet certain public service obligations. Examples are adherence to equal-time provisions, limitations on materials unsuitable for children or offensive to community standards of morality, and rules about access to broadcast facilities. Access rules are designed to ensure that there are channels available to governments and various publics to broadcast information about such public issues as education, public safety, and medical and social service programs. Over-the-air television in the United States has operated under trustee rules.

Periodically, trustee norms clash with the First Amendment. That is why free press purists are so alarmed about the increasingly strict enforcement of social and political correctness norms. They shudder that the majority of Americans applaud when journalists in the United States are fired for saying some terrorist actions might be fueled by legitimate grievances or when the FCC imposes heavy fines on a network because a female entertainer’s breast was accidentally bared during a broadcast. Given majority approval of such restraints on the press, especially in times of crisis, it is difficult to predict how much freedom the trustee system will grant to the press in the future. The thrust of social pressures will decide that issue.<sup>44</sup>

### Areas Most in Need of Reform

Digital communication technologies require a far more complete rethinking of the scope and purpose of federal regulation of broadcast media than has happened thus far. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 is inadequate for dealing with the revolutionary technological changes. There is a dire need for major policy innovations.

In the traditional media realm, the difference in treatment between the unregulated print media and the regulated electronic media has become highly questionable. It was based on the assumption that there would be numerous competing newspapers in the United States, while broadcast channels were scarce, so the forces of competition could not work properly to make the airways an open marketplace of ideas. In reality, competition has been rising among broadcasters, especially with the proliferation of cable television and Internet sources. Meanwhile, competition among daily newspapers has lessened.

There is no longer any merit in the argument that the scarcity of a particular type of news transmission, along with its importance to the public good, should be the litmus test for determining regulation policies. The distinctions made among publication formats are equally outdated. For example, many newspapers are now available in print and electronic versions. Should the print version be free from controls while the Web version is regulated, or vice versa? If the latter, the price of progress in electronic transmission of printed news could be the loss of freedom from government regulation.

Total deregulation of television broadcasts and reliance on traditional First Amendment values is not a realistic policy option in the United States for the foreseeable future. Opponents of deregulation contend that the impact of television on public life in the United States is so profound that the public interest requires controls. Even when competition is ample, it may be necessary to mandate access for neglected viewpoints and to provide programming for ignored audiences, such as children, who also need protection from unwholesome information. Insurmountable opposition to total deregulation makes it essential to think in terms of an overhaul of the policies adopted in the 1996 Telecommunications Act.

The outcome of such an overhaul is impossible to predict because the forces favoring regulation and the forces favoring deregulation are fairly evenly matched, but the camps may be shifting as broadcast media are under increasingly competitive threats. It is even hazardous to predict that the regulatory system will be revised to deal with public needs in the Internet age. After all, there was a sixty-two-year gap between the Communications Act of 1934 and the 1996 act. The only safe prediction is that piecemeal skirmishes and full-scale assaults on regulatory policies will continue apace in the years to come.<sup>45</sup> The back and forth over net neutrality seems destined to continue over the short term, especially as the Trump administration is likely to have very different views on how the Internet should (or shouldn't) be governed.<sup>46</sup>

It is also reasonably safe to predict that there will be some regulation to cope with unsavory developments on the Internet.<sup>47</sup> The battles for regulation have already begun in the courts with lawsuits involving property rights to information published on the Internet. Publishers of music videos, for example, have sued, claiming violations of copyrights and piracy of their offerings.<sup>48</sup> The government has passed rules that allow legal action against individuals or groups accused of virus attacks on e-mail messages, spamming, and fraud committed with Internet tools. There is also a good chance that new rules may make website owners responsible for the information that they allow to appear on their sites. Big players such as Facebook, for example, have instituted certain rules to prohibit sexual images of children. While the concept of a limited number of curbs on Internet freedom of information has become accepted, the ongoing of discussion about net neutrality principles described above means we can expect lengthy and heated battles over the nature and extent of what rules to govern the Internet are appropriate and the means for enforcing them.<sup>49</sup> But what that ultimately means for the Web is presently hard to guess.

The growing popularity of social media, especially as sources for news, introduces a new and interesting set of questions related to governance. As we discussed at length in earlier chapters, social media platforms are now widely used for news. On these platforms, information of significant importance for public affairs is produced, shared, and consumed. Even the 2016 election cycle highlights how misuse of these platforms for something like "fake news" can have broad consequences. Historically, news providers in broadcasting have

been required to perform their role with the "public interest" in mind. In the case of broadcast news, these public interest rules are the basis of media being allowed to use the broadcast spectrum for free. How should the government think about news and the public interest in the realm of social media? Phil Napoli argues that two features currently characterize public interest in the social media space. First, views of public interest on social media are currently restrictive, focusing only on curbing harmful content rather than on what kinds of content should be encouraged. Examples are Facebook and Google deciding to take action to prevent the dissemination of fake news on their sites. Second, Napoli explains that existing notions of public interest on the Internet are individualist, in that they are in the hands of individual users (as both consumers and producers of information).<sup>50</sup>

The fake-news-on-Facebook scandal points to the fact that social media companies may increasingly find themselves in positions historically reserved for producers and editors, and that they will certainly be pressured into thinking about the public interest, even if they are not mandated to think about it on a regular basis. Unfortunately, recent work underscores the fact that the institutional evolution underlying technology firms does not shape them into the same kind of public interest-minded intermediary that is institutionalized professional journalism. At least in the realm of providing advice and services to campaigns, tech firms developed consultant-type roles aimed at solidifying their worth rather than the public interest.<sup>51</sup> The fake news scandal, too, revealed that Mark Zuckerberg was only grudgingly willing to make an effort to stop fake news, and only after public scrutiny. The scant evidence we have so far shows the digital information environment lacks the negative as well as the positive aspects of journalistic gatekeeping. For all its faults, traditional news media have served the public interest rather well, especially considering the rapid rate at which their resources are declining.

## THE SHAPE OF THE FUTURE

The trends outlined thus far are not the only ones ahead. Many other issues will require decisions that go far beyond resolving technical issues. The direction of communications policy is at stake and with it the tone and possibly the direction of U.S. politics in general. John M. Eger, a former director of the White House Office of Telecommunications Policy, once remarked that the United States was "moving into a future rich in innovation and in social change." But this meant that the country was also moving into a storm center of new world problems. The new technologies are "a force for change throughout the world that simply will not be stopped, no matter how it is resisted." And then he asked, "Are we ready for the consequences of this change? Are we prepared to consider the profound social, legal, economic, and political effects of technology around the world?"<sup>52</sup>

In the communications field, the structure for policy making at all government levels is fragmented and ill suited to deal with the existing

problems, to say nothing of those that must be anticipated. Policies are improvised when pressures become strong, yielding in a crazy quilt pattern to various industry concerns, to public interest groups, to domestic or foreign policy considerations, to the pleas of engineers and lawyers, and to the suggestions of political scientists and economists. Narrow issues are addressed, but the full scope of the situation is ignored. As W. Russell Neuman has noted, "The concept of a comprehensive industrial policy or even a broadly focused reformulation of communications policy for the information age is political anathema in the centers of power."<sup>53</sup> The decades-long struggle over the 1996 Telecommunications Act and over subsequent amendments proves that this assessment is unfortunately correct.

## SUMMARY

Many people are dissatisfied with the performance of the mass media, including the Internet. Critics can and do air their dissatisfaction through formal and informal channels, but criticism usually has had limited success in bringing reforms. To fill the gaps left by the major legacy media, numerous alternative media have been created. These media either serve demographically distinct populations or cater to particular substantive concerns or political orientations. Two opposing trends have been simultaneously at work. One is a trend toward concentration of media power in the hands of a few huge corporations; the other is a trend toward multiplication of news suppliers and fragmentation of news audiences.

In this chapter we explored the social and political consequences of technological advances affecting mass media and outlined the areas in which new public policies are needed. We briefly sketched the political roles played by the medley of print media, over-the-air and cable television, and the Internet. We discussed the political and economic obstacles that media based on new technologies must overcome to compete against established competitors. We also outlined several looming problems and hailed the arrival of the age of broadcast plenty. The impact of these changes on life and politics in the United States could be enormous unless resistance to the pace of change slows progress. Fragmentation of the broadcast audience has raised fears of political balkanization and breakdown of the national political consensus that has been deemed essential for successful democratic governance. The reality has been far less grim thus far.

Changes in regulatory policy are in progress to integrate the new broadcast and narrowcast technologies into the existing mass media regulatory structure. But a total overhaul of the current policy regime is unlikely. The forces favoring greater government control of media content continue to be strong because the public is afraid that some news providers will abuse their powers and harm public interests. Whatever the outcome, the debate about media regulation and

deregulation needs to safeguard First Amendment rights in the century that lies ahead. Freeing the electronic media from government supervision will undoubtedly lead to some misbehaviors and abuses, but that may be the lesser evil if more government regulation is the alternative. As Thomas Jefferson wrote to his colleague Edward Carrington in 1787, "Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter."<sup>54</sup>

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