Media scholars and regular consumers of media have been trying to figure out how—and how much—influence the media have on public opinion and policy practically since the creation of mass media. No one likes to think that they’re influenced by an unseen hand, and yet we know from the billions of dollars that are spent on product advertising that exposure to persuasive techniques in advertising and marketing can lead to changes in behavior and buying habits. We will talk about these techniques and how they apply to politics and political messaging in Chapter 3. In the 1920s and 1930s, the emergence of radio and other mass media news networks, the success of wartime propaganda, and a new interest in psychological perception all combined to raise fears about the power of mass media. The concern at the time was that mass media could singularly and easily sway the public, injecting messages like a hypodermic needle into a passive mass audience.¹

Today, the media landscape is more fractionalized and polarized than in recent years. The hegemony of a few big media has been undermined by the Internet and the creation of cable, digital, and online news and opinion. And yet, as we saw in Chapter 1 and will discuss further here, media ownership is increasingly concentrated among a few global corporations, and there can be an illusion of choice across media platforms owned by the same company. Elite opinion is still a force in what motivates politicians, while the decline of local newspapers arguably has placed even more pressure—and influence—in the hands of a few national newspapers in terms of what they highlight in their media coverage and what gets the attention of the public and politicians. At the same time, the loyalty of Fox News Channel viewers to the views of the networks’ prime-time hosts during the coronavirus pandemic had demonstrable impacts on their views on the seriousness of the coronavirus epidemic and misinformation about it, according to several studies.²

While people are not petri dishes and it can be difficult to isolate a precise cause and effect between a single media exposure and opinion, the effects are there, especially cumulatively, and can be analyzed. The traditional concepts and historical foundations for studying the media still apply and can be adapted to include today’s media environment, including
visual media. Along with more recent work on the role of emotion and “your brain on politics,” the concepts here provide an important framework for being “media archaeologists” analyzing the impact of media on politics and public opinion.

**Media-Effects Theory**

*Media-effects theory* is the concept that exposure to media affects people’s attitudes and perceptions. News inevitably involves selection. Not everything that happens gets covered, and the news media thus play a gatekeeper role. The prominence and display of stories connotes significance. Big headlines and photos on the front page, web page, or lead story on the newscast are all ways that the news media signal to the reader or viewer that this is what the media outlet considers most important today and at the moment. Issues compete for attention from the media, from political actors, and from the public. And coverage in one major news outlet often generates coverage—and commentary—in other media outlets, adding to the issue’s salience, its perceived importance. Conversely, an event or an issue that does not get covered by the media may not be considered important or even known by the public and political leaders.

When political scientists in the 1940s began measuring whether exposure to media led to actual changes in voting behavior, using that standard for a specific impact—on voting—led them to conclude that the media had what was called minimal effects. More recent research has tracked media effects more broadly, focusing more on the cumulative effects and influence of media coverage on learning, opinion formation, and public opinion.

**Walter Lippmann and the Nature of News**

In his 1922 book *Public Opinion*, author Walter Lippmann effectively anticipated today’s twenty-four-hour news environment; he came up with concepts about the nature of news that are helpful and relevant today. Lippmann was a journalist who had worked for the Allies during World War I, and he was one of the first to explore how the ways that journalists gather the news have impact on what gets covered and how coverage, in turn, affects perceptions of events and people in the news. In this book we’ll call these journalistic practices and culture the conventions of news-gathering.

Lippmann observed early on that the public was increasingly perceiving the world around them not through direct experience but through the reflected, distorted reality of the world as published in what was then called “the press.” Lippmann likened the public to the cave dwellers in
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Plato's *Republic*, people who see the world above them not through direct experience but through the shadows of the world above on the walls of the cave—i.e., through the media.³

Lippmann recognized that the news media are not ideally suited for their role in the democracy—in part because of the commercial demands of the media and the ways news is gathered and disseminated. “The press is no substitute for institutions,” he wrote. “It is like the beam of a searchlight that moves restlessly about, bringing one episode and then another out of darkness into vision. Men cannot do the work of the world by this light alone. They cannot govern society by episodes, incidents, and eruptions. It is only when they work by a steady light of their own, that the press, when it is turned upon them, reveals a situation intelligible enough for a popular decision.”⁴

The image of the news media as a *restless searchlight*, focusing intently on one person or story in a glaring spotlight before moving on to another, brilliantly describes the excesses of some coverage on television, particularly on twenty-four-hour cable news. The death of a celebrity, a celebrity scandal, or a highly publicized criminal trial that has other cultural resonances can become what cultural critic Neal Gabler has called real-life *movies*, making public figures and even celebrities out of previously unknown people and drawing viewers in for incremental updates in a seemingly real-life soap opera that conforms to the norms of TV entertainment—and, for good and for ill, is entertaining.⁵

The Episodic Nature of News Coverage

The image of the moving spotlight is an excellent metaphor for describing and examining another important concept: the episodic nature of news coverage. On television and in online video, it is easier for the news media to cover a single incident than an ongoing situation or an in-depth investigation. The single, breaking news event has immediacy and drama—and a defined time and place—to draw viewers and readers.

Lippmann compared an ongoing situation to a seed growing in the ground. The news, he maintained, is not likely to tell you about the situation until the seed visibly bursts through the ground, as what we today call a breaking news story.⁶ This episodic nature of news coverage, media critics and researchers say, makes the public less likely to connect individual episodes to the larger issues—whether it’s food safety or the environment. Political scientists have found that episodic news coverage leads people to assign individual causes and responsibility to such events, rather than holding public officials accountable.⁷

The example Lippmann gave from his day was the difference in coverage between a miners’ strike and the conditions that might have led to the strike. To cite an example on the same subject from more recent media, TV
networks devoted many hours of coverage in 2010 to an explosion in a coal mine in West Virginia that led to the deaths of some thirty miners and a criminal investigation against the owner. Government inspectors’ reports of multiple safety violations and fines levied against the mine had gone largely uncovered until the widely covered disaster, as had mine safety experts’ concerns over independent oversight by the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration.8

The West Virginia disaster was what journalists call the news peg for reporting that, in the days afterward, found national journalists using the incident to write about previous problems at the plant and in mining inspections overall.9 Similar trends can be found in other recent stories of disasters and death among consumers. But it appears to have taken the seed bursting through, the mining disaster, to bring national attention to the issue germinating on the ground.

Aware of television’s—and the government’s—bad habit of turning off the cameras and moving on once the compelling drama and video from a disaster have subsided, major TV news anchors have kept their promise to come back to stories such as rebuilding after Hurricane Sandy and Hurricane Katrina, often doing so on anniversaries, which is another convention of news-gathering. But the rebuilding of Puerto Rico after disastrous hurricanes virtually disappeared from the news after a time, which officials there said affected their ability to get ongoing federal aid. And, except in crises, there can be little ongoing coverage of whole continents internationally on network television, which reflects both cutbacks in international reporting as well as a presumed lack of interest on the part of Americans until Americans and American interests are involved.

In a distinguishing counter trend, a few major news organizations today are devoting significant resources to reporting on the seeds in the ground, through multiplatform packages that combine in-depth investigative reporting and interviews with people affected by an issue, along with data analysis, still photography, online video, documents display, and other reporting tools. Here are some examples: the New York Times revealing documents that showed a pharmaceutical company knew about the addictive uses of its popular opioid drug;10 the Wall Street Journal investigating Medicare billing;11 the Associated Press investigating severe labor practices in the seafood industry that led to the freeing of two thousand slave workers, criminal trials, and reforms;12 the Washington Post reporting on the lives of low-wage workers;13 the Los Angeles Times investigating a corrupt city government in a small California town;14 and the staffs of the Arizona Republic and USA Today Network combining text, podcasts, video, and virtual reality to provide a variety of perspectives on building a wall across the U.S. border with Mexico.15

Online, Vox has pioneered in “explainers” that lay out the facts and data on policy topics.16 On broadcast television, Frontline and POV on the
Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) continue award-winning investigative and independent filmmakers’ documentaries in a medium where the one-hour investigative documentary was once a public interest staple on all the broadcast networks.

In contrast to these examples are the stories—from local government meetings to investigative reporting—that undoubtedly are going uncovered due to cutbacks and layoffs with media consolidation in local news. In 2015, to cite one example, reporter Rob Kuznia was in the news when it was reported that he had left the Daily Breeze of Torrance, California, by the time he and two other journalists had won the Pulitzer Prize for local reporting on a corrupt local school district. Kuznia and one of his coauthors, who has also since left the newspaper, cited cutbacks in staffing and an increasingly stressful work environment as reasons for leaving journalism for public relations.17

**Agenda-Setting Theory**

In 1963, Bernard Cohen made an important observation that the press “may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about . . . The world will look different to different people, depending . . . on the map that is drawn for them by writers, editors, and publishers of the papers they read.”18 That distinction between telling people what to think versus what to think about is an important aspect of agenda-setting in the media. *Agenda-setting theory* describes, and seeks to measure how media content influences the relative salience that the public attaches to different topics and issues.

In 1968, Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, two professors at the University of North Carolina, noticing that “more than ever before, candidates go before the people through the mass media rather than in person,” tested their hypothesis that “while the mass media may have little influence on the direction or intensity of attitudes, it is hypothesized that the mass media set the agenda for each political campaign, influencing the salience of attitudes toward the political issues.”19

Building on the concept of *cognitive mapping* in psychology, McCombs and Shaw described what they called a need for orientation. “Each individual will strive to ‘map’ his world, to fill in enough detail to orient himself, to intellectually find his way around,” they wrote.20 Two factors, they said, help determine the strength of a person’s need for orientation via the media: (1) relevance (Is the issue being written about relevant personally?) and (2) uncertainty (Does the reader/viewer feel that he or she has enough information on the topic?).
Studying voters in one community—Chapel Hill, North Carolina—and their attitudes about the issues in the 1968 presidential campaign, McCombs and Shaw attempted to match what these voters who were registered but undecided said were the key issues in the campaign with the actual content of the mass media used by these voters, including their local newspapers, *Time* magazine, and the evening newscasts on CBS and NBC.

The 1968 presidential race between Republican Richard Nixon and Democrat Hubert Humphrey, Lyndon Johnson's vice president, took place during a tumultuous time, with the Vietnam War and anti-war protests, the civil rights movement, and a Republican platform calling for law and order. Segregationist Alabama governor George Wallace was running as a third-party candidate. In their research, McCombs and Shaw found that although the news media devoted “a considerable amount of campaign coverage to . . . analysis of the campaign itself . . . i.e., horserace coverage about a candidate's chances or tactics, there was a very strong correlation (+.967) between the relative rankings of issues by the news media (in terms of amount of coverage and prominence of coverage) that these respondents consumed and the issues they said they were most concerned about and thought the government should do something about.”

In other words, as David H. Weaver wrote in an article describing the history of agenda-setting research, McCombs and Shaw had found that “the public learns not only about a given issue but also how much importance to attach to that issue by the amount of information in news reports and its position.”

### Civil Rights and the History of Agenda-Setting

National media coverage of the civil rights movement in America in the 1960s is an outstanding example of agenda-setting by national media. At a time when the broadcast TV networks' nightly newscasts were seen by virtually everyone tuned in to television, national TV reporters' and print reporters' accounts of nonviolent civil rights protests and brutal, racist responses in the South helped Dr. Martin Luther King and other civil rights leaders put their movement and conditions in the South on the national agenda. “The news media played an enormous role in mobilizing public opinion,” civil rights leader Julian Bond said in an interview with the author, “saying to the country, to the world really, ‘Here’s this movement. It’s about this: X-Y-Z. It’s very simple: here are these people who can’t do something because of the color of their skin and they ought to be allowed to.’”
Bond, who later became a Georgia state representative and senator as well as chairman of the NAACP, cofounded the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a group of young civil rights activists, when he was twenty years old. SNCC led lunch counter sit-ins and other protests against segregation in the South. “An important part of my job with SNCC was to get media coverage of what we were doing,” Bond recalled.25

As Bond noted, media coverage, including on TV and in memorable still photographs, shone a national spotlight on racism and violent reaction to nonviolent protest in the South. In 1963, for example, images of policemen in Birmingham, Alabama, turning dogs and powerful water hoses against peaceful young civil rights demonstrators affected public opinion and helped move President John F. Kennedy to push for important civil rights legislation. “President Kennedy watched the TV pictures from Birmingham, and he said, ’It makes me sick,’” Bond recalled. “Here’s the president of the United States watching this happen, and if it made him sick, what do you think other people felt, too? It made them sick and made them say, ’This has got to stop.’”26 Kennedy, who had been reluctant to push civil rights legislation, later gave a televised speech to put forth broad civil rights legislation that was enacted under President Lyndon Johnson after Kennedy’s assassination in 1963.27

Agenda-Setting in Major Media Today

Since the original studies of agenda-setting, there have been hundreds of studies using Shaw and McCombs’ methodology to compare content of news media with rankings of issues and public opinion, including online and in social media. In their book News That Matters: Television & American Opinion, Shanto Iyengar and Donald R. Kinder compared news agendas with the public’s agenda. They concluded that issues that receive broad coverage in national media are perceived as important, while those that are not covered lose credibility. They and other researchers have found these connections continuing over time, with significant media attention to inflation or to energy, for example, being reflected in national polls of the public about the most important issues of the day.28

The wide range of what people consider “the media,” plus polarization in politics and partisan media, have led some researchers to ask how strongly agenda-setting applies today.29 We live in an era of increased selective exposure, where many people may seek out specific outlets to reinforce their beliefs. The credence people give to stories also, interestingly, has been linked to whether the subject is something they feel they already know about—or not. Media coverage and the response of politicians and the public interrelate, and the impact of media coverage may vary according to what is being discussed—and where—and how politicians and the public respond.
But while there is need for a more nuanced view of agenda-setting and related concepts in today’s media-politics culture, researchers are finding that it still applies, including in experiments attempting to measure exposure to news on Facebook and news organizations’ websites. “Overall, the evidence in support of the agenda-setting function is overwhelming,” Iyengar wrote. “One-shot surveys, time-series analysis of public opinion, and laboratory experiments all agree that the issues in the news are the issues that people care about.”

Citing congressional hearings on tobacco and public health risks that came after major media coverage of the issue, Iyengar continued, “Policy-makers know that when the media spotlight is on a particular issue, they are likely to have greater success in promoting or moving along legislation [over opposition] because the public is clamoring for action.”

The reporting of the New York Times, the Washington Post, and the Wall Street Journal, in particular, had a major agenda-setting function in contemporary media and politics during the Trump administration, with these publications regularly breaking news, including from sources within the Trump administration, that had members of Congress citing news organizations reporting—positively and negatively—as evidence in congressional hearings and investigations, including impeachment. President Trump and his allies in Congress and among prime-time hosts on Fox News Channel and conservative talk radio quoted their reporting to attack them and their journalists. The reporting of these publications and others from Politico to USA Today has been amplified by debriefs of their reporters on cable television.

Violence in children’s television, the practices of tobacco companies, and government health care for military veterans are among the many issues where investigative reporting by major media have led to public outcry—and then to congressional hearings and legislation.

The revelation in the New York Times and New Yorker magazine of women’s allegations of sexual assault by Hollywood entertainment mogul Harvey Weinstein ultimately led to more women telling their stories with the #MeToo hashtag (based on the original Me Too movement founded by activist Tarana Burke), a national conversation, and ultimately a criminal conviction of Weinstein for rape. Other investigations by the New York Times and Washington Post of allegations of sexual harassment and even sexual assault led to the resignations of powerful figures in the media from NBC Today show host Matt Lauer to PBS’s Charlie Rose.

The Role of Elites

People vary in their attention to politics and exposure to political information, and many remain uninformed or scarcely informed, while others view being informed as important and even a civic duty. In his book The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion, John R. Zaller argued that
political elites—politicians, government officials, activists, experts and policy specialists—play a key role in how the world is portrayed and understood by citizens overall. Public opinion, he wrote, is largely shaped by exposure through the media to elite discourse on issues.

Creating a model of public opinion, Zaller theorized that, rather than holding one attitude or a single opinion about an issue, people’s stated opinions reflect their responses to considerations (what they have heard or read about), what they have accepted (if the message is consistent with their own prior beliefs), and what they have sampled from (which ideas from a mix of opinions and ideas are salient—and can be reached for, or top of mind—at the time). He found, somewhat surprisingly, that the more closely people follow the news, the more their opinions reflect those of elites in government and in politics. Elite media affect elite opinion, which impacts on what politicians and policymakers view as important—and believe they need to respond to.

One might think that the seemingly endless frontier of the Internet would undermine the hegemony of political elites and mainstream media in determining agenda-setting—and it has. But, even online, readers tend to favor a few brand-name outlets and voices they trust from major news organizations. And, while political TV talk show producers are on the lookout for younger, more diverse voices, these influential programs still tend to book traditional elites—from journalism, government, and political strategy.

In his important book *The Myth of Digital Democracy*, political scientist Matthew Hindman analyzed data about readership online and found that online news audiences are concentrated among the top twenty outlets. He also found a concentration in online fundraising and organizing among major interest groups. Finally, his data showed that, contrary to what had been commonly believed, the Internet also is dominated by political discussion among elites.

**Agenda-Building**

In their work on what moves public opinion, Everett M. Rogers and James Dearing argued that communications scholars should look also at the interrelation among the media agenda, the public agenda, and the policy agenda, including what political elites such as the president and members of Congress are reading and seeing in news coverage and how that affects the policy agenda. They talked about the importance of agenda-building as well as agenda-setting, defining *agenda-building* as “a process through which the policy agendas of political elites are influenced by a variety of factors, including media agendas and public agendas.” The media, in other words, do not operate in a vacuum and are influenced by what political elites and other political actors highlight as important—and
vice versa—with impact on policy and public opinion. In later research, political scientists have used other phrases to describe agenda-setting today, including intermediate agenda-setting—major news media setting the agenda for other news media via their coverage—and network agenda-setting, which is how the media's linking of attributes or elements in a story can influence the audience themselves to see the elements as interconnected in their own minds.

On MSNBC, Rachel Maddow and other hosts agenda-set by focusing intensely on the investigation into special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election, the impeachment trial, and—later—on criticism of the Trump administration's response to the coronavirus.

The loyalty of Fox News Channel viewers and the interconnectedness between the channel and the Trump administration, with a number of senior Trump officials being hired from positions as prominent commentators on Fox News Channel, is an example of the concept of agenda-building.

In previous years what some journalists called a "Fox News story" used to be ignored by other major media, but that is much less likely to be the case today. In 2014, for example, the story of a Nevada cattle rancher leading a protest against paying grazing fees on federal public lands fit a Fox narrative about the government taking away freedoms and received repeated airplay on Fox, conservative talk radio and online media and light coverage elsewhere—until the dispute led to a tense, armed standoff between the rancher and his supporters and law enforcement officials.

The network repeatedly aired disputedly edited "undercover sting" videos by two anti-abortion activists that appeared to show a Planned Parenthood official discussing selling fetal tissue for medical research. Planned Parenthood said that it did not sell fetal tissue for medical research and that the edited video was unrepresentative of their work. But, in the debate over abortion, the videos led to repeated proposals by Republican lawmakers to defund Planned Parenthood.

**Reverse Agenda-Setting**

Reverse agenda-setting is the term that has been used to describe how user-generated content, from blogs to popular memes and Twitter posts, can help set the agenda of what have been called major "legacy" media. Today, it works both ways, especially when it comes to news coverage and politicians' social media, with politicians quoting major media and major media focusing on politicians' social media in their news coverage.

YouTube video and social media have accelerated the way that a compelling photo or video shot at the scene of an event can personalize a story from around the world, go viral on the Internet; be picked up as online video news; and set the agenda for discussion on TV, in
print, and online. A Turkish photographer’s picture of a small Syrian child drowned on the beach in 2015 went viral; news organizations reported on the identity of the child and his family as the image, however fleetingly, became a symbol for the crisis of desperate refugees fleeing the Syrian civil war. The #BlackLives Matter movement started in 2013 as a hashtag by three women reacting to an acquittal in the death of Trayvon Martin, the unarmed Black teenager who was shot and killed in Florida by a neighborhood watch volunteer. Citizen journalists exposed unsafe drinking water in Flint, Michigan, and forced the attention of the public—and local officials—to the problem through their videos and subsequent news coverage in other media.

Agenda-Setting on Social Media

Despite the highly contentious relationship between Donald Trump and major media, his tweets were featured in—and often dominated—the contemporary news agenda to a remarkable degree. Trump—who began his presidency with what he called his “war with the media”—stepped up making the media an enemy, on Twitter and in his political rallies, in 2019 and throughout the 2020 presidential campaign. The nonpartisan Freedom of the Press Foundation in January 2020 found that over the previous year, “Trump tweeted negatively [himself, not including retweets] about the media 548 times—almost as many as his first two years in office combined . . . That means that more than 11% of the presidents original tweets focused on delegitimizing and insulting the U.S. media.” The foundation’s database analysis found that the frequency and rate of the president’s anti-media tweets “ramped up” with his 2019 announcement of his reelection campaign and reporting on his administration and congressional investigations, shifting his attention also to attacking Democrats in Congress with the opening of the official impeachment inquiry.

In the 2020 presidential race, Sen. Bernie Sanders criticized what he called “the corporate media,” which he said reflected corporate interests opposed to his proposals. Sanders supporters and several media critics also were critical of commentary by some MSNBC hosts that they maintained reflected bias against Sanders by the Democratic National Committee. We’ll discuss news coverage of Sanders as well as how politicians, political leaders, and social movements overall aim to influence and drive the news agenda.

Facebook, Twitter, and other social media present challenges to measuring their impact overall on politics and policy. But scholars today are adding big data analysis to more traditional surveys, coded content analyses of media coverage, and experiments where, as researchers have done for many years with traditional media, they research agenda-setting by altering parts of a mock-up—for example, changing the race or gender or the
news outlet in a mock-up story. In one experiment, Jessica T. Feezell found agenda-setting and issue salience of news stories distributed on Facebook feeds among a group of college students. In another 2018 study, the authors harvested and analyzed thematically millions of tweets on what are called Black Twitter, Asian American Twitter, and Feminist Twitter and interviewed members of these Twitter subgroups to see how these groups use digital media and their perceptions of media coverage of their communities. In her research on the implications of consuming news on mobile devices such as tablets and smartphones versus reading news on a computer, Johanna Dunaway and her colleagues used eye-tracking software to watch how the people in their experimental studies read and engaged with news stories.

### Priming Theory

The media, including entertainment and news media, provide important cultural role models for what is considered masculine and what is feminine—and what is heroic. Our view of what we want in a president is influenced by what is emphasized and portrayed in the media as “presidential.” Researchers have found that the relative emphasis the news media place on a president’s programs and policies—for example, his or her handling of the economy versus foreign policy—has impact on what the public considers important in evaluating presidential performance. This concept is called *priming*.

Iyengar and Kinder, who advanced the theory of media priming, defined it as “changes in the standards that people use to make political evaluations,” with the focus of the media having influence over the benchmarks by which a president, a candidate or a government might be judged. Priming can be seen as an extension of agenda-setting. People cannot and do not pay attention to everything. Rather, we are what researchers call “cognitive misers”; we ordinarily rely on a few heuristics—intuitive shortcuts and rules of thumb—with one such heuristic being relying on information that is most accessible. Iyengar and Kinder theorized that the standards by which people judge a president, while likely having several sources, were strongly influenced by which stories were covered on TV news. They and other researchers have found that voters tend to vote for the presidential candidate they think can do the best job on the issue they think is most important; extensive media coverage conveys importance and can help move one issue to the foreground while another less favorable to the candidate recedes.

In their research on presidents and priming, Iyengar and Kinder found that voters’ views on the then president Jimmy Carter’s overall competence in his reelection bid in 1980 against California governor Ronald Reagan were
influenced by the daily coverage of the protracted negotiations to free American hostages captured and held by followers of Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran.\textsuperscript{51}

If you look at news coverage from this period, you will see pictures of American hostages in blindfolds and the U.S. embassy occupied dominating the news.

On a new ABC News daily late-night program created to follow the crisis, \textit{America Held Hostage} (later, \textit{Nightline}), influential news anchor Ted Koppel quizzed government officials and experts about the failure of the Carter administration to free the hostages. On screen was a count of the ultimately 444-day crisis that called attention to the Carter administration's failures and—as the title of the show said—sent the message to millions of viewers that the U.S. itself was being held hostage.\textsuperscript{52} That was not the only issue on which voters judged President Carter's competence; the economy was also key. But the hostage crisis—and the coverage of it—had impact on how voters reacted and viewed the competence of President Carter and his administration to deal with it.

President Richard Nixon was defined by the Watergate scandal, impeachment, and his resignation from office, while public opinion about President Bill Clinton's impeachment led by Republicans in Congress over the Monica Lewinsky scandal ultimately did not appear to matter to voters at the time as much as the economic performance of the Clinton administration. The Gallup poll at the time showed that Clinton's approval ratings actually went up, not down, during the Monica Lewinsky scandal, perhaps in response to the strong economy or perhaps, it was thought at the time, in a "sympathy vote" for the president in reaction to the twenty-four seven coverage and more partisan-led impeachment charges.\textsuperscript{53} (In recent years, however, Bill Clinton's standing with the public is being reexamined in media and politics through the prism of media revelations of sexual misconduct by prominent figures in media and politics and the #MeToo movement.)

\textbf{Priming Presidential Campaigns}

Former Texas governor George W. Bush (the son of forty-first president George H. W. Bush) defeated Al Gore, Bill Clinton's vice president, in 2000 in a contested election that ultimately was decided by the U.S. Supreme Court. (We'll discuss media and politics in that election in Chapter 4.) President Bush's approval ratings were strongly linked to his handling of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks: His approval ratings surged from 35 percent to a record 90 percent, the highest in Gallup polling history, with his September 20, 2001, speech to a joint session of Congress rallying the country and outlining a fight against global terrorism seen as a defining moment with the public, according to Gallup polling that was done before and immediately after the speech.\textsuperscript{54} “Almost three-quarters of all
Americans say they saw the address live, and another 14% saw rebroadcasts or excerpts of the speech,” Gallup reported at the time. Bush’s popularity declined in the aftermath of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the Iraq War, but national security and fighting terrorism remained key issues as Bush won reelection against Sen. John Kerry, the Democratic nominee, in a contest we’ll discuss further in Chapter 3.

In the 2008 presidential election between Barack Obama and Sen. John McCain, the Republican nominee, the public was concerned about the global financial crisis known in the U.S. as the Great Recession. The news media were covering the crisis extensively, while coverage of other issues such as terrorism and immigration were less prominent. In 2008 exit polls, voters in the general election overwhelmingly named the economy as the most important issue—62 percent in exit polls, a very high percentage for exit polls historically—compared to the war in Iraq (10 percent), health care (9 percent), and terrorism (9 percent). Sen. McCain, a Vietnam War hero and longtime supporter of the war in Iraq, received 86 percent of the votes of those who listed terrorism as the top issue, but those voters accounted for only 10 percent of the electorate. Barack Obama had voted against the war in Iraq, and he and the Democrats were seen as better able to deal with the economy than Senator McCain.

**Priming Personal Presidential Traits**

The media—both in news and in popular entertainment—also have an impact in priming what personal traits are considered “presidential” and relatable.

And soft-focus, personal coverage of candidates’ and presidents’ families helps make the public feel connected to presidents, members of Congress, candidates, and other elected officials. Jacques Lowe, President John F. Kennedy’s personal White House photographer, took the photographs of the president and Jacqueline Kennedy with their young children, Caroline and John Jr., that, published in *Life* magazine and other publications, constitute many people’s memories of the Kennedy presidency—even among those born long after Kennedy was president. A close-up color photo of a genial, rugged-looking Ronald Reagan smiling in a cowboy hat at his California ranch, taken by Reagan’s
personal photographer, has been widely used and published for many years because it conveys what has been perceived and portrayed as Reagan's trademark optimism and the mythic “Western individualism.” that has roots in America's history and self-image and still has appeal to many today.  

Many of the engaging, intimate photos of President Obama; First Lady Michelle Obama, and their daughters Malia and Sasha as well as the president's frequent interactions with children came from the extensive access granted to official White House photographer Pete Souza, who also took the famous dramatic photo of the president and advisers in the “war room” monitoring the capture of Osama bin Laden. These photos were widely distributed to the news media—and to the public—via the Obama administration's then new and sophisticated social media operation, including an active White House Flickr photo account and Instagram. By contrast, in the first few years of Donald Trump's presidency, there were few official intimate White House family photos.

Photos of the president participating in cabinet meetings, signing bills and showing his signature, and meeting with world leaders became the staples of a more limited official White House photography operation.

In 2013 the White House Correspondents' Association and thirty-seven news organizations submitted a letter to then Obama press secretary Jay Carney protesting Souza’s exclusive access to what the journalists said were newsworthy events. “The way they exclude us is to say that this is a very private moment,” said Doug Mills, a New York Times photographer covering the White House since Ronald Reagan. “But they're making private moments very public.” The Obama administration argued that photographers couldn't be at every event and that they were simply making use of new tools in social media to give the public new behind-the-scenes access to the presidency.

### Priming Presidential Spouses

The appeal of these images, along with the Obamas’ ease on popular talk shows—including President Obama on the daytime talk show The View and Michelle Obama’s “Carpool Karaoke” in the White House drive-way with CBS Late Late Show host James Corden—could help explain President Obama’s personal popularity in office and beyond. (We'll discuss how and why politicians and political leaders go on talk shows and late-night comedy programs in a case study in Chapter 5.) Michelle Obama’s popularity consistently ranked higher than her husband's in office, and Laura Bush (the wife of George W. Bush) was one of the most popular First Ladies ever. Both women championed important causes such as health and education; but, as with other First Ladies in office, these were portrayed and viewed as less “political” initiatives.
At the same time, when it comes to having a woman elected as president, as we will discuss in Chapter 8, researchers and candidates for many years have found that perceived likeability—defined in gendered terms and reflected in media coverage and candidates’ focus groups—has been a long-standing criterion by which the public has been primed to judge female candidates for office, especially for president of the U.S. When Hillary Clinton was first running for president in 2008, there were real questions and humorous asides about how that would work and what the former president should be called—First Gentleman? First Dude?—although other countries have been led by female presidents. With the nomination of Biden and Harris in 2020, their marriages and their roles in the marriages were portrayed as both traditional and contemporary by the Democrats.

**Framing**

How something is framed in news media and by political groups has real impact on how an issue is perceived, according to many studies. The simplest way to think about it is as a frame around a picture, with the frame defining the picture. In media and politics, framing attempts to define the subject—and influence perception—by emphasizing certain elements of the subject while excluding other elements. “Framing essentially involves selection and salience,” Robert Entman wrote. “To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.”

Entman and other researchers have studied, for example, how the Cold War frame of the Soviet Union versus America dominated U.S. foreign policy—and U.S. media coverage of foreign affairs—for many years. In addition, as Entman and other researchers have noted, what is not included as a choice in a frame is significant. Tax cuts, for example, can be framed as promoting economic growth—or adding to income inequality. Entman and others have argued that, in the buildup to the war in Iraq post–9/11, the option not to go to war in Iraq was not sufficiently considered or included in the frame of lost lives and fighting a war on terrorism.

Psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky won the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences for their work challenging the rational model of decision-making and the effects of cognitive biases in thinking and framing risk and decision-making. They found that presenting the same information in different ways has an impact on the choices people make. To cite one simple example, stores have sales that offer “buy one, get one free”
because that is more appealing psychologically. Kahneman wrote in his book *Thinking, Fast and Slow* that if you say “Italy won” or “France lost” the World Cup in soccer in 2006, for “the purposes of logical reasoning,” the two outcomes are interchangeable—but “there is another sense of meaning” in which the two sentences do not mean the same thing if the meaning is what happens in your associative memory while you understand it. . . . The fact that logically equivalent statements evoke different reactions makes it impossible for Humans to be as reliably rational as Econs” (humans studied in the abstract by economists).69

In one famous experiment about the outbreak of a fictional, dangerous new disease, Kahneman and Tversky posed questions about possible actions that had identical outcomes as to how many people would die if different courses of action were followed. There were different results because of the way the questions and risks were framed in terms of lives saved or lives lost.70 Their work, which relates to people’s loss aversion—in the stock market and in life—helped set the stage for other framing research.

**Framing Language and Issue Frames**

There are two categories of framing to consider here: (1) framing language and (2) issue frames. In terms of framing language, message creators hope to trigger associations that are positive or negative in the mind of the receiver of the message, depending on their side of the issue. This fight over whose language prevails is called framing and counter-framing, and it relates particularly to framing political and policy issues about which people may feel deeply. Advocacy and political groups work hard to have their own, positive descriptions of themselves used in news stories and political discourse. In the debate over abortion, for example, one side describes themselves as pro-life, while the other describes themselves as pro-choice not “pro-abortion,” as some opponents have aimed to characterize them.

Words matter, and researchers have found that, rather than offering and responding to purely rational appeals, people respond to and politicians may deal in code words and stereotypes—bra-burning feminists, corrupt politicians, tax-and-spend liberals, hard-hearted capitalists, welfare queens, and worse—that appeal to and amplify often unconscious fears and other negative emotions about “the (unknown) Other.”

There are real consequences to which framing language and issue frames prevail in political and advocacy campaigns as well as media coverage—in terms of public perceptions and opinion and even legal action and funding for solutions. There was a strong debate in 2016, for example, over the framing of the mass shooting in which a gunman pledging allegiance to ISIS killed fifty people and wounded many others at an Orlando, Florida, nightclub: Was it an act of terror, an antigay hate crime, new evidence of the need for gun control legislation, as many Democrats and some Republicans in Congress said?
Or was it an act of “radical Islamic terrorism” and evidence of what then presidential nominee Donald Trump claimed was President Obama’s timidity about using that term? 

In 2019, there were back-to-back mass shootings in Dayton, Ohio, and El Paso, Texas. A young, white gunman drove ten hours to El Paso after writing an online “manifesto” against the “invasion” of the U.S. by “Mexicans” at the U.S.-Mexico border, with President Trump himself and Fox News Channel prime-time hosts having used the word invasion. After the shootings, there were renewed calls for gun control legislation to be passed in Congress. There were also debates over whether political leaders should call out President Trump over the similarities in language, along with questions about whether the government—and the news media—had done enough to label and investigate the rise of white supremacy and anti-Semitism, online and in mass shootings in the U.S. and abroad.

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**Case Study: Framing and Counter-Framing Obamacare**

Politics and media in the passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, or Affordable Care Act, is an example of the power of framing—and counter-framing—including the importance of the timing of framing language, the repetition of competing frames in powerful language from politicians and the media, and the involvement of the president in the debate.

In his first year in office as president, Barack Obama made comprehensive health-care reform—an important but complex topic—a top priority. With insurance premiums rising dramatically in recent years and healthcare costs accounting for one-sixth of the economy and forty-seven million Americans uninsured, many Americans were concerned about the affordability of their health care. In a Pew Research Center poll released in June 2009, 41 percent of respondents said that the health-care system needed to be “completely rebuilt,” and an additional 30 percent said the system “needs fundamental change,” while only 24 percent said the health-care system “works pretty well and needs only minor changes.” Unlike in 1993, when the health insurance industry opposed health-care reform put forth by the Bill Clinton administration, this time the industry, and doctors and hospitals, was expressing support for fixing the health-care system.

(Continued)
In this context and with Obama’s popularity with the public as a new president, there appeared to be an argument to be made that reforming health care was an economic necessity for the future as well as a social good.

Republicans in Congress mounted a powerful, frightening, and repeated framing campaign against what came to be known as “Obamacare.” Soon, angry citizens were confronting legislators at local town halls—with dramatic moments videotaped and broadcast on YouTube—that had been intended to discuss and promote the benefits of Obama’s proposals. Jokes about the irony of senior citizens who had benefited from a major government healthcare program, Medicare, shouting for the government to “take your hands off my health care” were no laughing matter for advocates for Obamacare.

Former 2008 Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin, who remained a popular political figure among conservatives and Tea Party members, made personal the false notion that Obamacare would include “death panels,” who would decide whether the elderly and infirm would receive health care. Referring to her own child who was born with Down syndrome, Palin wrote this on her Facebook page: “The America I know and love is not one in which my parents or my baby with Down Syndrome will have to stand in front of Obama’s ‘death panel’ so his bureaucrats can decide, based on a subjective judgment of their ‘level of productivity in society,’ whether they are worthy of health care. Such a system is downright evil.”

The idea of death panels was not true, and many fact-checking organizations—including FactCheck.org from the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania—said it was untrue. But polls showed that many Americans believed it to be true. And, more importantly, the framing of Obamacare as a dangerous government takeover dominated the political narrative—and the media narrative as well. Republican legislators repeated “government takeover” not only in Congress but also on the influential Sunday morning newsmaker talk shows—and conservative prime-time hosts on Fox News Channel and talk radio repeatedly used exactly the same language—dangerous “government takeover”—as well.

Winning the Message War on Obamacare

“An analysis . . . of the language used re: Obamacare” across the board by opponents in “those crucial months in the media reveals that opponents of the reform won the ‘messaging war’ in the coverage,” researchers for the nonpartisan Project for Excellence in Journalism concluded in a study of key terms...
used in more than 5,500 health-care stories in the mainstream media between June 2009 and March 2010. The researchers found that “opponents’ leading terms appeared almost twice as frequently (about 18,000 times) as the supporters’ top terms (about 11,000 times).”

There were media stories that attempted to explain the complicated proposals, but congressional coverage shifted to horse-race coverage of politics and strategy. Meantime, ideological debates on cable news and radio talk shows were the most prominent venue for discussion of Obamacare, the researchers found, with the health-care proposals the number one story by far in the talk-show sector, accounting for 31 percent of the airtime during the period studied, compared to 10 percent of the new coverage in newspapers and 9 percent of coverage in the online sector.

The economy and president Obama’s work to deal with the recession received far less attention on cable and radio talk shows than in other media; President Obama, the researchers found, was a “fluctuating” presence in the health-care story, while positive coverage of the proposals and negative commentary about “greedy” insurance companies by liberal hosts on MSNBC were overshadowed by negative portrayals by Republicans and prime-time hosts on Fox News Channel. A Gallup poll in 2010 found that “government involvement in health care” had emerged as a top concern, cited by 10 percent of respondents as the number one health-care problem facing the country.

By the time the Affordable Care Act won approval in Congress in March of 2010, it passed without a single Republican vote. Democrats proclaimed the sweeping legislation a singular legislative victory for President Obama and the American people; Republican House Speaker John Boehner said the legislation was an example of out-of-control big government.

In the 2010 midterm elections in Congress, Democrats up for election downplayed their support for Obamacare, while Republicans running against Obamacare returned the House of Representatives to Republican control for the first time in forty years. Voters cited health care as their second most important concern, after the economy, in exit polls after the midterms. Meantime, throughout the debate, the public consistently reported being confused about the proposals and the programs enacted.

**Visual Framing**

In her autobiography, longtime CBS News 60 Minutes anchor Lesley Stahl wrote that she was surprised by the positive reaction of Richard Darman, Ronald Reagan’s deputy chief of staff, to a story she had done on the then new video stagecraft techniques that critics of Reagan said...
were being employed to distract attention from cuts in social spending: Reagan being cheered by supporters waving small American flags, cutting a ribbon at a nursing home, giving medals to disabled athletes. Expecting criticism from the White House, as she recounted it, Stahl instead received a congratulatory call from Darman, who loved the emotional visuals in the piece and told her that nobody would remember her conflicting audio narrative.  

President Reagan, who had been a movie actor in Hollywood before he was elected governor of California, was called “The Great Communicator” as president, and he and his media advisers recognized the often unconscious power of visuals and stagecraft techniques in political communication on television. In their book *Image Bite Politics: News and the Visual Framing of Elections*, Maria Elizabeth Grabe and Erik Page Bucy argued for more scholarly research into the audiovisual elements of TV news and Internet sites. “Ignoring the visuals of a televised news report means overlooking much of the meaning that viewers derive from the viewing experience,” they contended. As we will discuss further in Chapter 3 on political advertising and persuasive techniques, the visual techniques, including editing, lighting, camera angles, and who and what is seen in the background in ads or public addresses, all are designed to put the candidate or elected official in a favorable light—literally and figuratively.

We should not forget also the power of eloquent language in presidential speeches. Ronald Reagan, like John F. Kennedy, had eloquent speechwriters: Still remembered are today Ted Sorenson for Kennedy's inaugural speech urging a new generation of Americans to “ask not what your country can do for you” and Peggy Noonan's quoting from a poem about flying to “slip the surly bonds of earth” in Reagan’s speech to the nation after the Challenger space shuttle disaster. 

During the 2008 Democratic primary, Hillary Clinton's emotional response to a question from a sympathetic questioner at a small gathering in New Hampshire became almost a *tabula rasa* for voters’ views on Clinton. After the questioner asked her why she was running for president when doing so was obviously exhausting, a teary-eyed Hillary Clinton replied that she was running because “the stakes for our country are so high.” In a clear reference to Barack Obama's relative inexperience in government, she added that “some of us are ready, and some of us are not.” The fact that Clinton became emotional and teary-eyed when speaking about the country, a departure from her usual demeanor in formal campaigning, made the “Hillary gets emotional” video not only prominent in the news but also prominent online and on YouTube, where it was downloaded and viewed millions of times.

The Clinton video is an example not only of the power of emotional video but also how their meaning can be in the eye of the beholder. That
Hillary Clinton video moment is an example of confirmation bias—the tendency for people to believe something in the media if it confirms what they already believe. Reactions to the video were split between Clinton supporters and opponents, with some supporters saying it humanized her when she seemingly let down her guard, others saying it was a cynical move on her part at a time when she was down in the polls, and others debating how the video would have been received if the man running for commander in chief had grown emotional and teary-eyed.

**Framing and Reframing Same-Sex Marriage**

In the case of changes in the courts and public opinion about same-sex marriage that led to the five-to-four Supreme Court decision legalizing same-sex marriage across the U.S.,

there were multiple factors at work, including political and legal campaigns by LGBTQ rights activists to oppose state bans and build political support for first civil unions and then same-sex marriage. But the activists who led this campaign and other observers have said that the campaign was significantly helped by successfully reframing “same-sex marriage” in the minds of many Americans, especially young people, as a new civil rights issue—for couples to marry—as well as an issue that potential allies could relate to: the desire to marry someone you love.

“An advantage we have is that we are in every family,” Marc Solomon, national campaign director for Freedom to Marry, one of the lead groups in the campaign, said in an interview with Molly Ball of the Atlantic.

As Solomon noted, former Republican vice president Dick Cheney and his wife, Lynne, have a daughter, Mary Cheney, a political consultant, who is a lesbian. (Their second daughter, Liz Cheney, the Republican congresswoman from Wyoming, said that she opposed same-sex marriage.)

During the 2000 presidential campaign, Dick Cheney took the stance that, as the Associated Press reported, “states should decide legal issues about personal relationships and that people should be free to enter relationships of their choosing.” In 2004, as vice president to George W. Bush, Cheney opposed President Bush’s proposal for a constitutional ban on same-sex marriage. “Lynne and I have a gay daughter, so it’s an issue our family is very familiar with,” Cheney told an audience in Iowa. “With the respect to the question of relationships, my general view is freedom means freedom for everyone. People ought to be free to enter into any kind of relationship they want to.”

Public support for same-sex marriage changed dramatically from 2004 to 2019. In Pew Research Center polling in 2004, Americans opposed same-sex marriage by a margin of 60 percent to 31 percent. In 2019, that...
support had flipped, with a majority of Americans (61 percent) supporting same-sex marriage and 31 percent opposing it.\textsuperscript{100}

Conservative critics have said that entertainment and news media “endorsed the homosexual lifestyle,” as they described it, with positive coverage, while advocates have said that the media are reflecting changes in public attitudes with more inclusive coverage—and should be doing more to cover the LGBTQ community and issues. An estimated forty-four million people watched the 1997 episode of the Ellen DeGeneres sitcom Ellen, accompanied by a Time magazine cover story (“Yep, I’m Gay”), in which DeGeneres came out as gay after many years of being closeted.\textsuperscript{101} But in her 2019 HBO comedy special, “Relatable,” DeGeneres, who became a popular daytime talk-show host, said that coming out on her sitcom had hurt her professionally.

Her sitcom was canceled by ABC one year after the famous episode and, she said, several years of difficulty in returning to television until she was offered the opportunity to host a syndicated talk show in 2003.\textsuperscript{102}

As public opinion shifted in favor of same-sex marriage, political leaders—and corporations—endorsed what had been considered a controversial stance and still is opposed by many. President Obama did not endorse same-sex marriage until 2012.\textsuperscript{103} More recently, an analysis by NBC News in 2020 found outdated state same-sex marriage bans still on the books of numerous state legislatures. Some local officials refused to perform such marriages immediately after the 2015 Supreme Court decision overturned the state bans, and some state legislatures have subsequently introduced new state laws to limit same-sex-marriage, including on religious liberty grounds.\textsuperscript{104}

In 2018, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of a baker in Colorado who had refused to create a wedding cake for a gay couple, citing his religious beliefs that define marriage as being between a man and a woman. The narrow ruling reaffirmed the legality of same-sex marriage but found that the Colorado Civil Rights Commission had shown animus toward the baker by suggesting that his claims of religious freedom were being used to justify discrimination.\textsuperscript{105} The decision, Adam Liptak wrote, “left open the larger question of whether a business can discriminate against gay men and lesbians based on rights protected by the First Amendment.”\textsuperscript{106}

As the chart from the Gallup polling organization shows (see Table 2.1), public support for same-sex marriage has remained stable—at 63 percent as of 2019, with Democrats, independents, and young people showing the strongest support for legal same-sex marriage and Republicans, at 44 percent in 2019, having doubled their support from 2009.
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The Power of the Senses

Print and online news media also can frame—and editorialize—visually, especially in magazine covers. A *Time* magazine cover favorably linked President Obama in 2008 with Franklin Delano Roosevelt leading America through the Great Depression. The cover humorously had a superimposed
smiling Obama on a famous photograph of a jaunty FDR, cigarette holder in hand in an open car, with the headline “The New New Deal: What Obama Can Learn from FDR.” In a strongly criticized Newsweek cover story in 2011, the magazine used a photo from their cover shoot in which Minnesota senator Michele Bachmann, a Tea Party supporter and 2012 candidate in the Republican presidential primary, stares into the lights in a way that makes her look crazed. The headline on the cover story was “The Queen of Rage.” Again, thinking about language, the word queen itself sounds sexist and demeaning. The story itself, interestingly, did not mention the word rage, although it did talk about the anger of Tea Party supporters.

Debate over Symbols

As a former TV producer and star, Donald Trump has been keenly aware of the impact of visual images, including his own camera angles as well as the imagery behind him at his rallies and public events. During the summer of 2019, President Trump’s insistence on a Fourth of July celebration that included a demonstration of American military strength by the Lincoln Memorial, with armored tanks and dramatic plane flyovers, prompted a fierce debate, with critics saying that the president was politicizing a previously apolitical national celebration that had not been attended by presidents in the past.

“Put troops out there so we can thank them—leave tanks for Red Square,” said Gen. Anthony C. Zinni, a retired four-star Marine general and former head of U.S. Central Command, who had served as a special envoy to the Trump administration. Architecture critic Philip Kennicott contended that the imagery of tanks at the Lincoln Memorial, the site of many peaceful rallies, was discomfiting to many because it was turning a civic space into a military one. The president ultimately gave a speech in which he saluted U.S. troops against his desired backdrop, and USA Today reported that the celebration was a tale of three events, with Trump supporters eager to cheer for his 2020 election, some protesters, and others there who said they just wanted to see the traditional concert and fireworks without the politics.
The Power of Sound

One striking example of how audio can be used to characterize a candidate is the infamous “Dean scream” in the 2004 presidential campaign. Vermont governor Howard Dean—who pioneered in Internet fundraising and Meetups with young supporters—had shown surprising strength among some voters as an anti-war candidate. When Dean lost in the Iowa caucus, he gave a speech to his young supporters in which he appeared to be screaming, almost maniacally, about how his campaign was going to go on to other primaries. The sound bite was played hundreds of times on cable TV and broadcast news and framed Dean as angry and irrational. In fact, Dean said in an interview with the author for Columbia Journalism Review that the speech was very different in the room. “I was in front of 1,200 screaming kids who couldn’t hear the speech, and the cable networks ran it as a speech with a directional mic—no crowd noise and no pictures of the crowd. So it didn’t happen at all the way it was on television,” Dean said. 112

The Dean scream fit opponents’ narrative of Dean’s temperament as angry. Dean and other reporters who were in the room at the time said that they did not think the moment was important until their editors asked them, “Did you see that?” The editors said, “How come you didn’t say anything about this?” The reporters were in the room; they didn’t think it was a big deal,” Dean maintained. 113 The video without the ambient sound was played countless times on TV, online, and on YouTube, becoming the defining image of Dean and his campaign.

SUMMARY

In this chapter we have looked at the key concepts for examining the impact of media coverage. News-gathering and publication involves selection, and what is covered—or not covered, and how—connotes significance. Media-effects study of that influence began with the emergence of mass media in in the 1920s and 1930s after World War I, when critics were fearful about the power of the media and propaganda to influence the public. More recently, researchers have studied media effects more broadly, in terms of cumulative media effects on learning and public opinion. Walter Lippmann in the 1920s devised concepts about the conventions of news-gathering—the media as “restless searchlight” and a social condition not being covered as a seed germinating in the ground—that are even more relevant in today’s twenty-four seven, breaking news environment.
Agenda-setting is the theory that media coverage has a significant influence on what the public considers important and the relative importance—salience—of issues. In 1968 Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw researched what voters in the presidential election considered important compared to the issues that were being covered in major media. They found a very strong correlation—and agenda-setting function for the news media—between coverage and perceived importance.

In the decades since, there have been hundreds of studies using their methodology. Two other researchers, Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder, compared news agendas with the public’s agenda and found that the issues that received broad news coverage in major media were perceived as important, while those not covered lost credibility. Today’s media environment, with broad definitions of what people think of as “the media” and chosen, selective exposure by some to news outlets they agree with, have led to more nuanced, related concepts for agenda-setting. But research in new and old media show the concepts still apply.

Agenda-building is a related concept that finds that media and politics and policy interrelate, with each influencing the other. Reverse agenda-setting refers to the ability of social media, from a Twitter-related social movement to a memorable photo that goes viral to influence attention and coverage in major media—and vice versa. Donald Trump’s use of Twitter is a skillful example of reverse agenda-setting, talking directly to his millions of supporters while his tweets often dominated the news coverage of the day.

The media, both news and entertainment, provide important cultural cues about what is considered masculine or feminine (in gendered terms), what is heroic and admirable. The news media have a priming effect on what traits are “presidential” and by what standards a president should be judged, by highlighting some personal traits over others, in presidents and their spouses. In addition, the news media with their coverage and commentary prime the public and have influence over how a president should be judged—for example, about his or her performance on the economy or in international affairs.

Framing is another key concept in media and politics. How something is framed—characterized and discussed—in the media and in politics has significant impact on perception and public opinion. There are language frames and issue frames, and opposing sides strive to have their frame predominate. The framing of Obamacare is an important case study, as is the framing—and reframing—of same-sex marriage. Visual framing affects people emotionally, as does framing in sound.
End-of-Chapter Assignment: 
Agenda-Setting and Framing

This assignment is designed to get you thinking about—and applying—two of the key concepts in this chapter: agenda-setting and framing. It’s a precursor to your doing your own formal case study of an episode or theme in recent media coverage—and its impact. Be sure to look at the Annotated Media Resources at the end of the book for how to access news articles and TV transcripts free online and through your library. Reread “How to Do Your Own Media Analysis Case Study” at the end of Chapter 1. That will be your guide for a formal paper—but it’s applicable here. Our goal with each assignment or paper with this book is to be “media archaeologists,” studying media coverage and applying key concepts for analysis.

For this assignment, pick a recent newsmaking story, based on original reporting, that has been on the front page (including online) in the New York Times or the Washington Post—and look at how the topic is framed there as well as what sources are referenced in the article. Then look through the transcripts for prime-time shows on CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News Channel that evening and over the following week. Answer the following questions. Bring your notes to class, and come prepared to discuss.

1. Did these shows reference the original news story—and how?
2. Did they frame it the same way—or not?
3. Did government officials respond or not—and how?
4. Are officials, other journalists, and the public talking about the story on Twitter and other social media?
5. What about the nightly newscasts on ABC, CBS, NBC, and PBS? The Sunday pundit shows on broadcast and cable?
6. If they don’t specifically credit the original story, as is often the case, do you see other media picking up the topic, positively or negatively?
7. What does your study tell you about agenda-setting and framing?