

Campus Compact, [www.compact.org](http://www.compact.org)  
 Kids Voting USA, <http://kidsvotingusa.org>

These are two, out of many, organizations that focus on civic engagement. These organizations have designed programs that, among other goals, aim to increase the political skills and political activity of adolescents and young adults.

CIRCLE (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement), [www.civicyouth.org](http://www.civicyouth.org)

CIRCLE conducts and disseminates research related to the civic engagement of youth. Its Web site contains a wealth of information, including research reports, tools for engaging in political and civic activity, and links to other civic engagement sites.

## CHAPTER 3

# Mass Media

AT 10:00 A.M. on June 23, 2003, the U.S. Supreme Court handed down two decisions regarding the use of affirmative action in higher education.<sup>1</sup> These cases originated when several white applicants who were denied admission to the University of Michigan filed suit against the university on the grounds that its admissions policies unlawfully provided racial preferences for black, Hispanic, and Native American applicants. In defense of their admissions policies, the University of Michigan argued that taking race into account was necessary to build a diverse student body. And why is diversity so important? Because, the university argued, *all* students benefit from learning in a diverse environment.

Upholding the University of Michigan's basic premise, the Court ruled that educational benefits stemming from a diverse student body justify the use of race in admissions; however, the Court also said that the university cannot go overboard and put too much weight on race. These were historic decisions because it was the first time the Supreme Court had addressed affirmative action in higher education since 1978.<sup>2</sup> As a result, many citizens were interested in the outcome of the cases. On the day the Court announced its rulings, there were demonstrators waiting anxiously outside the Supreme Court building, but most people were too busy working or taking care of their families to drop everything and hang out at the Court waiting for these rulings to be handed down.

Citizens cannot do everything and be everywhere at once. Thus, they rely on the media to keep them up to date on important political events, such as the Supreme Court rulings in these affirmative action cases. Participatory democratic theorists would argue that providing citizens with information is a fundamental role of the news media in a democratic society. A well-functioning, vibrant democracy requires news organizations that inform and educate citizens. The news media should serve as a critical intermediary transmitting vital information from elites to citizens and vice versa.

Did the media live up to that democratic standard when covering the Michigan affirmative action cases? Well, certainly not in its immediate coverage of the decisions. By 10:15 a.m. that morning, before the Supreme Court had even finished announcing *one* of its decisions, both ABC and CNN interrupted regularly

scheduled programming to run “breaking news” segments. The quality of the reporting in the segments left much to be desired. Citizens looking for a clear and coherent summary of these complex Supreme Court rulings were not going to get it from watching these reports.

Why would two reputable news organizations rush to put such low-quality fare on the air? One explanation for this lies with an extremely important characteristic of the mass media in the United States: major media outlets are businesses. And as such, they are in fierce competition with one another to make profits, which may or may not coincide with excellence in journalism. In this case, being first to report the Supreme Court rulings trumped any sense of civic obligation CNN and ABC might have to provide quality information to viewers. It is interesting to note that elite democratic theorists would not be troubled by this coverage because they support a market-based media system. From the elite democratic perspective, media outlets might not provide high-quality information in a free market, but they do provide the kind of news that people want to consume.

News norms also influenced the coverage of the Michigan affirmative action cases. Mainstream news organizations value objective reporting, which they define as providing both sides of a story. For example, journalists from mainstream news organizations were careful to balance their reporting by presenting the views of both the white student plaintiffs and the University of Michigan. But not all news organizations are alike. Some are not as constrained by the norm of objectivity, and other considerations influence their news coverage.<sup>3</sup> For example, the black media have different goals than the mainstream media; the black media report the news from a “black” angle rather than maintaining what they would argue is a façade of neutrality and objectivity. In covering the Michigan cases, journalists from black newspapers emphasized the history of racial discrimination at the university and discussed the ways in which the admissions process was biased in favor of white students, topics not covered by mainstream newspapers.<sup>4</sup>

Did the media coverage of the Michigan affirmative action cases influence public opinion? Because most citizens relied on the media to get news about the Supreme Court decisions, it certainly makes sense that the coverage would affect their support for affirmative action. In particular, the media might frame affirmative action policy in various ways.<sup>5</sup> Affirmative action could be described as a program that gives preferential treatment to black students while unfairly discriminating against white students. Let’s call this the reverse discrimination frame. Alternatively, the media could present the same affirmative action program as one that benefits all students by ensuring a diverse educational environment. Consider this the diversity frame. See Table 3-1 for examples of the two frames. Which media frame do you think would lead to greater support for affirmative action? Most likely the diversity frame because it appeals to the interests of citizens regardless of their race.

**Table 3-1 Media Framing of the University of Michigan Affirmative Action Cases**

<i>Media frame</i>	<i>Example</i>
Reverse discrimination frame	Bob Franken, <i>CNN Lou Dobbs Tonight</i> , June 24, 2003, lead story: “The other case involved a challenge to the University of Michigan’s more structured undergraduate admissions program with added points assigned to minorities. Chief Justice Rehnquist wrote the 6–3 decision saying ‘it violates the Equal Protection Clause that this one went too far in considering race.’”  Maribel Hastings, <i>La Opinión</i> , June 24, 2003, 1: “Los integrantes republicanos de la Comisión Nacional de Derechos Civiles criticaron los fallos. ‘Las preferencias raciales son la antítesis de la igualdad de protección bajo la ley. El mejor método de obtener diversidad en la educación superior es mejorar la educación desde el jardín de infantes hasta el duodécimo grado y no seleccionar a los estudiantes por el color de su piel,’ dijo el comisionado Peter Kirsanow.” [“The Republican members of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights criticized the ruling. ‘Racial preferences are antithetical to equal protection under the law. The best way to obtain diversity in higher education is to improve K through 12 education and not select students based on the color of their skin,’ said Commissioner Peter Kirsanow.”]
Diversity frame	Jackie Judd, <i>ABC World News Tonight</i> , June 23, 2003, lead story: “Good evening, Peter. It was a generation ago that the court ruled in the famous Bakke case, establishing that race can be used as a factor in college admissions. Today, the court reaffirmed that position, saying that the creation of a diverse student body is good for American society.”  <i>Chicago Defender</i> , June 24, 2003, 7: “The policy had gained worldwide respect at Michigan, Northwestern University, the University of Chicago and other fine colleges and universities because diversity enriches the educational experience of all students.”

*Source:* Quotations from Rosalee A. Clawson, Katsuo Nishikawa, and Eric N. Waltenburg, “Coverage of the Supreme Court’s Rulings in the Michigan Affirmative Action Cases: Comparing the Mainstream, Black, and Latino Media,” paper presented at the meeting of the Latin American Studies Association, Las Vegas, Nevada, October 2004, 4.

This discussion of media coverage of the University of Michigan affirmative action cases illustrates many of the points we touch on in this chapter. We begin with a discussion of what we should expect from the news media in a democratic society. We have already mentioned that participatory theorists argue the media should provide citizens with high-quality information, but there are additional roles the media should play to successfully serve as “the fourth branch of government.” Next, we examine general characteristics of the mass media that shape news coverage. We have just scratched the surface by highlighting the corporate, and therefore highly competitive, nature of major media outlets in the United States. There are other characteristics we analyze here as well.

Specific features of the news media also influence how stories are covered. Objectivity shaped how (at least some) journalists reported on the Michigan affirmative action cases, but it is just one of several important news norms we discuss in this chapter. We also grapple with the effects of media coverage on citizens. Framing affirmative action as a policy that benefits all students through ensuring a diverse learning environment is fundamentally different from framing it as a policy that discriminates against white students. Therefore, we investigate framing and other media effects on citizens’ opinions. Along the way, we will remind you that all media are not alike and illustrate how studying a variety of news media provides added insight. We close by reviewing the evidence and considering whether the media play their appropriate role in our democratic society.

### WHAT SHOULD CITIZENS EXPECT FROM THE MASS MEDIA IN A DEMOCRACY?

Before reading this section, stop and ask yourself: What do you expect from the mass media in a democracy? How do you think the media should behave? Notice we are not asking how the media act in reality. We will get to that in a moment. For now, we are interested in your ideal vision of how the media should operate in a democratic society.

Probably the first thing that came to mind is that the media should be free from government control.<sup>6</sup> Freedom of the press, of course, is a fundamental tenet in a democracy. The government should not control the media by censoring stories or by forcing the publication of stories. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, for example, should not be able to stop the *Washington Post* from publishing a particular story, nor should she be able to require the newspaper to cover certain events. In a democracy, a free press should also be free from economic forces, such as market pressures and advertising dollars. Powerful economic forces should not be able to prevent the media from covering important issues of the day and thus limit debate.

A press free from governmental and economic control will have great benefits for citizens because such a press should have several key characteristics. First, the media should act as an intermediary between citizens and elites, providing both

with the information essential for a well-functioning democracy. Specifically, media organizations should provide citizens with the information and analysis necessary to make smart decisions. Further, the media should cover how citizens think about issues so that elites will be able to make educated decisions on behalf of their constituents. Second, a free press should provide a forum for diverse views. Elite and citizen opinion from across the spectrum should be presented so that debate can be wide ranging and critical or alternative voices will be heard. Finally, the media should play a “watchdog” role.<sup>7</sup> Because citizens cannot attend every city council meeting or participate in every public hearing held by a federal agency, they rely on the media to scrutinize the actions of public officials. The media should provide citizens with the information necessary to hold government accountable and act as a check on the judicial, legislative, and congressional branches of government.

This vision of the media is most consistent with the one held by participatory democratic theorists. Participatory theorists, as you recall, want citizens to be actively engaged in the political process. By providing accurate information, the media create knowledgeable citizens ready to participate in the give-and-take of politics. Moreover, by presenting diverse viewpoints, the media ensure that both privileged and marginalized voices will be heard. This facilitates participation on the part of all citizens (thus redressing the inequality in society, a core concern of participatory theorists). Participatory democratic theorists believe that political participation makes people better citizens, and they see the potential for the media to assist in that process.

Elite democrats, on the other hand, would be happy with a press relatively free from governmental control. We say “relatively free” because these theorists might argue that there are circumstances under which government officials should have influence over what the media publish. Take stories on national security, for example. Elite democratic theorists might prefer censorship of such stories because they think it is unnecessary for citizens to know the details about these policies. Elites are the decision makers, so there is no need for the media to risk undermining national security by revealing information to the public. Furthermore, elite democrats would be much less concerned with the effect of economic forces on the media. From their perspective, media outlets should be responsive to market pressures and advertising dollars so that citizens receive the kind of programming they want. As long as the media provide enough basic information to citizens so they can vote, these theorists are not concerned with the quality or diversity of news presented in the media.

### WHAT GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MASS MEDIA SHAPE NEWS COVERAGE?

Let’s turn now to a discussion of the mass media in reality. Here we focus on general characteristics of the media that influence news content. In the United