Public Opinion in Comparative Perspective
BOX 3-1 SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE ARAB SPRING

"We use Facebook to schedule the protests, Twitter to coordinate, and You-Tube to tell the world."[1]

This telling tweet from a female Egyptian activist captures two critical aspects of the protests that swept across North Africa and the Middle East beginning in spring 2011. First, social media played an important role in (1) identifying and communicating shared grievances among oppressed peoples, (2) organizing protests to articulate those grievances, and (3) publicizing those protests and governmental responses to them to people around the world. To put it quite simply, social media allowed lots of people to communicate very quickly with lots of other people. Individuals were able to share information, compare notes, find common ground, and inspire one another to challenge the authority of dictators in record speed. That brings us to the second point. All the tweets, Facebook posts, and videos uploaded to YouTube would have meant nothing if people had not been willing to hit the streets and risk their lives engaging in civil disobedience. Protesting in cyberspace would not have brought down Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia or Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. It required people on the streets day after day, night after night willing to publicly protest these autocratic regimes. It required people willing to put their lives on the line to push their countries toward democracy. Facebook was critical in scheduling the protests, but it was the demonstrations themselves that led to the ousters of Ben Ali and Mubarak.

This Egyptian activist's tweet is insightful to be sure, but there is one critical aspect of the protests that it does not capture. Oppressive governments can also make use of social networking tools.[2] In Egypt, for example, Mubarak's government sent out text messages to try to mobilize pro-government rallies. Governments can use videos posted online to identify protesters, and they can track electronic activity to locate dissidents. In Syria, security police detained a twenty-four-year-old protester, Mohammed Ali, and asked for his Facebook password, which would have allowed the police to identify others in his network. Ali refused to provide the information at first, but then the police threatened to torture and kill his father. Now his friends are not safe, but they continue to protest the regime.[3] Furthermore, governments can shut down access to the Internet and cut off phones lines. For instance, Mubarak's government blocked Internet and cell phone services for nearly a week during the protests calling for his removal.

(continued)

What role has social media played in fomenting change across North Africa and the Middle East? With protests continuing to unfold, it is too early to make a final judgment about this. Yet we must be careful not to fall into the trap of assigning predominant influence to social media or assuming social media played no role in toppling autocratic rulers. Either of these assessments is too simple. Time and further analyses will reveal the full complexity of social media's role in protests in the region.

1. Philip N. Howard, "The Arab Spring's Cascading Effects," Miller-McCune.com, February 23, 2011, http://www.miller-mccune.com/politics/the-cascading-effects-of-the-arab-spring-28575/ (accessed August 14, 2011).
2. Simon Cottle, "Media and the Arab Uprisings of 2011: Research Notes," *Journalism* 12 (2011): 647–659.
3. Deborah Amos, "Syrian Opposition Echoes Cry for Liberty or Death," National Public Radio, August 2, 2011, http://www.npr.org/2011/08/02/138834930/syrian-opposition-echoes-cry-for-liberty-or-death (accessed August 15, 2011).

WHAT SPECIFIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE NEWS MEDIA SHAPE THE REPORTING OF POLITICAL EVENTS?

In this section, we discuss **news norms** that influence the reporting of political events. Here we focus on norms that shape how journalists—not columnists or pundits—decide what's news, and we discuss whether the norms constrain the activities of all media organizations. We also provide a critique of news norms.

News Norms

One of the most important norms that shapes news coverage is **objectivity**. In practice, journalists define objectivity as providing both sides of an issue. To uphold this norm, journalists strive for balance in their reporting. In the U.S. political context, this often means that a Republican viewpoint is balanced with a Democratic one.[47]

A close cousin of objectivity is **neutrality**. According to this norm, journalists do not inject their personal opinions into news coverage. Instead, they report on political events by presenting others' viewpoints in their stories, especially the viewpoints of **official sources**. Official sources include primarily government officials but also other people who are powerful in society.[48] By relying heavily on official sources, journalists are able to do their jobs easily and efficiently. It also allows them to achieve the norm of **accuracy**. Journalists work hard to ensure the information they report is correct. They perceive official sources to be reliable, legitimate, and in the know; thus, journalists regularly turn to these sources in their news coverage.[49]

Assigning journalists to **newsbeats** is another journalistic norm.[50] Journalists are assigned to cover specific institutions or topic areas. These are called beats. For example, major news organizations assign journalists to the White House beat and the Pentagon beat. This allows journalists to gain expertise on certain topics; develop relationships with key players, which is obviously important because of the heavy reliance on official sources; and create familiar, reliable routines in a job where events are constantly changing.[51]

Journalists are also influenced by norms related to **newsworthiness**. Conflict garners significant attention because it is considered especially newsworthy. For example, media coverage of Congress focuses heavily on partisan conflict within the institution and strife between the Congress and the president.[52] The emphasis on conflict is also obvious in news coverage of political campaigns. The media tend to focus on the "**horse race**" aspect of campaigns: who's ahead in the polls and who's behind, who has momentum and who doesn't, and who's leading in fundraising and who's faltering.[53] Even once politicians gain office, the news media still assess their every move in terms of competition and gamesmanship rather than substance.[54]

These norms are a function of the news media trying to reach as broad an audience as possible as efficiently as possible. Many media corporations want to advertise to large audiences, not just Republicans or Democrats. Thus, they provide objective news that will not tick off one side or the other (or at least tick off both sides equally). This was not always the case; newspapers early in U.S. history served the interests of powerful officials or political parties.[55] Technological changes during the mid-1800s, however, allowed publishers to print greater quantities of newspapers within a much shorter time frame. This technological advance allowed for high circulation, which encouraged businesses to own and advertise in newspapers. It became necessary for journalists to report the news in such a way that newspapers would appeal to a wide audience in an efficient manner; thus, journalists adopted the norms of objectivity, neutrality, accuracy, newsbeats, and newsworthiness.[56]

Do these news norms constrain the activities of all media organizations? No, they do not. Robert Entman distinguishes media sources based on the extent to which they adhere to news norms.[57] He argues that **traditional journalism** (such as the *New York Times* or the *CBS Evening News*) has a strong commitment to news norms, but **advocacy journalism** is committed to only some of these norms. Advocacy journalism includes magazines with an ideological bent, such as *The Nation* on the left and *The Weekly Standard* on the right. These magazines strive for accuracy, but have no interest in balancing sources to follow the norm of objectivity. **Tabloid journalism** is much less committed, if at all, to news norms. Tabloid journalism includes cable programs such as the *O'Reilly Factor* on Fox News, which appeals to a conservative audience, and *The Rachel Maddow Show*

on MSNBC, which speaks to a liberal audience. Over the last three decades, the explosion of cable channels has allowed for profitable niche programming. And because these programs do not need to appeal to a wide audience, the norms of objectivity, neutrality, and accuracy have gone by the wayside. In fact, the draw of these cable news programs tends to be the bombastic commentary of their hosts. The Internet has also provided a platform on which tabloid journalism can thrive.

Even in traditional journalism, the commitment to these news norms seems to be weakening. Recent research suggests that the agenda of traditional news outlets is being influenced by tabloid journalists, which can undermine the norm of accuracy. For example, in 2008, a large community organizing group, ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now), rocketed from near-obscurity to widespread notoriety on the basis of misinformation and edited videos designed to smear the organization.[58] "Opinion entrepreneurs" circulated inaccurate information about the organization's voter registration activities, including accusing ACORN of perpetuating voter fraud, by blogging on corporate-sponsored Web sites.[59] This voter fraud frame was picked up by traditional news outlets, including the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, NPR, and the broadcast TV networks. Many journalists did little or no fact checking to determine whether the allegations against ACORN were true; instead, they simply repeated assertions made by politicians and bloggers despite a lack of evidence supporting their claims and sometimes even in the face of evidence contradicting their claims.[60] Under pressure to compete in a 24/7 media environment, traditional journalists working for national news organizations abandoned the norm of accuracy and covered ACORN in tabloid fashion or worse.

Critiques of News Norms

Our discussion of news norms may have raised some concerns in your mind. On the one hand, these news norms enable journalists to appeal to a wide audience, provide accurate information, and do their work in an efficient manner. The norms also ensure that powerful political elites will be able to get their messages out to the public, thus pleasing elite democratic theorists. On the other hand, *some* of these news norms make it difficult, if not impossible, for the news media to live up to the ideal standards proposed by participatory democratic theorists.

To begin, the norm of objectivity requires journalists to present two sides of an issue. But what if there are more than two sides? Take abortion, for example. The debate is often characterized in the media as pro-life versus pro-choice, with Republican elites supporting life and Democratic elites supporting choice. Among the public, however, 45 percent of Americans do not fall neatly into either camp. Instead, they believe that abortion should be available under certain circumstances, such as rape, incest, danger to the life of the mother, or when some other

clear need has been established.[61] Because journalists rely so heavily on official sources, the abortion debate looks as if it is two-sided. If journalists paid more attention to the opinions of average Americans, however, they would see that the issue is actually much more complex.

We have discussed the limitations of objective reporting when there are more than two sides to an issue, but what about when elites are in agreement and thus there is only one side of an issue? In those circumstances, one of two things happens. Either important issues simply go unreported by the media because there is no conflict to draw the attention of journalists or, if the issue does get covered, it appears as if there is no debate on the topic even though plenty of debate may be occurring among those who are not powerful enough to be included as official sources. In matters of foreign policy and national security especially, it is not uncommon for elites to stake out uniform positions.[62] Thus, on some of the most important issues of our day—war, terrorism, and international trade—elites often present a united front, which leads the press to act more as a tool of government than a watchdog. Indeed, in 2004, both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* expressed regret for not publishing stories that challenged the George W. Bush administration's justifications for going to war in Iraq.[63]

The assignment of journalists to newsbeats results in journalists developing close relationships with government officials on those beats, leading to the concern that journalists may become too cozy with those officials. From this perspective, journalists act more like lapdogs than watchdogs. Newsbeats can also lead to **pack journalism** as journalists assigned to the same beat end up covering the same set of stories from the same perspective. Further, newsworthy events may be happening that do not get reported because there is no journalist assigned to that newsbeat.[64] For example, news organizations regularly assign journalists to cover the Pentagon. Those journalists become familiar with weapons systems, military buildups, and troop deployments; they attend press conferences; and they cultivate key sources. Not surprisingly, stories emanating from the Pentagon are regularly featured in news coverage. Reporters are not assigned to cover the Department of Veterans Affairs as a beat, however. As a result, significant stories may be overlooked. An important story about the shoddy treatment of wounded soldiers at Walter Reed Army Medical Center was missed for months, if not years.[65] And, of course, some stories may never be reported.

Finally, the norm of newsworthiness leads journalists to favor coverage of conflict and the strategic aspects of political campaigns and governance over substantive issues. This is highly problematic for those citizens who want journalists to cover the issues so they can evaluate whether political leaders are addressing their problems.[66] It is also troubling for participatory democratic theorists, who see a sharp disconnect between what information journalists deem newsworthy and what information citizens need to function effectively in a democratic society.

ARE CITIZENS AFFECTED BY THE MASS MEDIA?

In this chapter, we have discussed what citizens should expect from the media in a democracy, and we have addressed the empirical reality of the media in the United States. By now, you should have a good feel for the general and specific characteristics of the media that shape news coverage. The question remains, however, whether citizens are affected by the mass media. That is the topic we turn to in this section.

The Hypodermic Model

Imagine you are going to the doctor to receive your annual flu shot. The doctor uses a hypodermic needle to inject you with the vaccine. You leave her office with the medicine coursing through your veins ready to fight off any flu bug that might come your way. Receiving a shot in a doctor's office is an (often unpleasant) experience to which we can all relate.

Now, let's translate this phenomenon to the political arena. Take yourself back in time to the Great Depression. Imagine you and your family sitting in your living room listening attentively to one of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's "fireside chats" on the radio. Or imagine you are in Munich, Germany, during roughly the same period. Picture yourself reading newspapers over which Adolf Hitler has exerted complete control. Are you being injected with messages from the mass media in the same way a doctor injects you with medicine? Are the media messages so powerful and you so weak that resistance is futile?

Bring yourself to the present and take a look around. Why are so many of your friends (and maybe even you) wearing Nike t-shirts or carrying Coach purses with the name brands prominently displayed? Is it possible that the advertising campaigns of these companies have "injected" your friends with their messages, thus getting them to buy overpriced products and provide free advertising for the company all at the same time?

These examples illustrate what has been called the **hypodermic model** of media effects.[67] The early to mid-1900s saw a huge growth in advertising, numerous technological changes that allowed average citizens access to the media, two world wars, the rise of dictators across Europe, and a powerful president at home. All these factors led some observers to fear that the media could control citizens. Underlying this fear were two assumptions: (1) that the media are extremely powerful and (2) that citizens are not sophisticated enough to ward off media messages. The hypodermic model is certainly a compelling metaphor, but is there evidence to support its view of media effects on citizens? It turns out that systematic support for such wide-ranging, persuasive effects of the media never panned out. Instead, scholars came to the conclusion that the media have relatively minimal effects on citizens' political attitudes.

Minimal Effects Model

Whereas the hypodermic model viewed citizens as blank slates waiting to be written on by the mass media, the **minimal effects model** of media influence has a more nuanced understanding of citizens. From the minimal effects perspective, citizens' slates are already marked up with a whole host of prior attitudes and predispositions when they encounter media messages. Citizens rely on these existing attitudes to help them sift through, evaluate, and often filter out media content. Thus, citizens are not passively injected with messages from the media; instead, they are active receivers or rejecters of these messages depending on their predispositions. As a result, the media have minimal effects on citizens' political attitudes.

Evidence of the media's minimal effects was provided by Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet in their classic study of Erie County, Ohio, during the 1940 presidential campaign between Franklin Roosevelt and Wendell Wilkie.[68] Lazarsfeld et al. trained local interviewers to conduct several in-home interviews with a representative sample of Erie County residents between May and November 1940. To be precise, this panel survey included six hundred people, each of whom was interviewed six times over the course of the campaign. Thus, the design of the study allowed the researchers to track residents over time to determine why people voted the way they did in November. In particular, Lazarsfeld and colleagues were interested in the influence of campaign messages on citizens' vote choices. By studying one community in depth, the scholars were able to assess the campaign messages that were circulating in the local media environment and examine what effect, if any, those messages had on voters. In this way, Lazarsfeld et al.'s research provides evidence that allows us to assess the power of the media to influence citizens' political attitudes.

Lazarsfeld et al.'s research findings are striking. First, they discovered that a remarkable 50 percent of citizens already knew in May for whom they were going to vote in November. Obviously, the campaigns' media messages were not changing people's choices because they had already made up their minds before the campaign even got started. Nevertheless, Lazarsfeld et al. argued that political communication still played an important role because it reinforced people's existing decisions. Hence, this was labeled the **reinforcement effect.**

Lazarsfeld et al. also identified an **activation effect** among those people who were initially undecided about which candidate to support. The researchers demonstrated that campaign messages aroused interest in citizens, which led them to pay more attention to the election; however, the fascinating thing was that citizens did not pay attention to all aspects of the campaigns. Instead, citizens honed in on particular magazine articles and newspaper stories that corresponded with their political predispositions. In other words, citizens with Republican-leaning characteristics were more likely to seek out Republican-leaning campaign news, whereas Democratic-inclined citizens sought out pro-Democratic media content. This selective attention to the media activated citizens' prior attitudes, which served to remind citizens why they held those attitudes in the first place.[69] Thus, citizens' latent predispositions were stimulated and strengthened by the news stories. Rarely were those predispositions challenged, and when they were, citizens were anchored by their predispositions and therefore resistant to change. By November, citizens' preexisting attitudes became crystallized, encouraging them to vote for the presidential candidate who was consistent with their values and predispositions all along.

Finally, Lazarsfeld and colleagues found little evidence of a **conversion effect**. In other words, very few citizens actually changed from one candidate to another during the course of the campaign. We might expect that citizens who had few existing attitudes would be susceptible to campaign messages and thus to conversion; however, those same citizens who did not have strong predispositions also did not expose themselves to campaign news. In other words, those most likely to be persuaded were the least likely to come across the persuasive messages. Conversion, then, was a rare phenomenon.

Lazarsfeld et al. also argued that the media's influence was limited because many citizens relied on conversations with politically engaged friends and family, rather than the mass media, to obtain information about the presidential campaign. The researchers described the process as a "**two-step flow of communication.**"[70] First, highly interested citizens would gather campaign information from newspapers and the radio. These people were called "opinion leaders."[71] Second, the opinion leaders would talk about the election with their friends and family, passing on information about candidates and issues to those who were much less caught up in the campaign. Therefore, Lazarsfeld et al. did not dismiss the influence of the media entirely because clearly the opinion leaders were gathering information from news organizations, but they did emphasize that personal contacts were more influential for most everyday, average citizens.

Subtle Effects Model

When scholars did not find evidence that the media had widespread persuasion effects, many lost interest in studying the influence (or lack thereof) of the media. Research in this area was dormant for quite a while. Maxwell McCombs and Donald L. Shaw reversed that trend, however, with their research on the agenda-setting role of the media in the 1968 presidential election.[72] McCombs and Shaw acknowledged that the media cannot change people's minds on the issues of the day, but they argued that *"the mass media set the agenda for each political campaign, influencing the salience of attitudes towards the political issues."*[73] Their study marks the beginning of the **subtle effects model** era of media research.

Agenda Setting. McCombs and Shaw's argument was based on a comparison between what a random sample of Chapel Hill, North Carolina, voters said were the key issues in the 1968 presidential election and the actual campaign coverage in the news media relied on by voters in that community. McCombs and Shaw found a strong relationship between the issues emphasized by the media and those issues deemed important by the voters. For example, the mass media devoted a significant amount of coverage to foreign policy and law-and-order issues, and Chapel Hill voters indicated those topics were major campaign issues. Thus, the media set the agenda by establishing which campaign issues are considered important in the minds of voters. The media "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.*"[74]

McCombs and Shaw's research breathed new life into the study of media effects and spurred a new generation of scholars to further investigate **agenda-setting effects.**[75] In 1982, Shanto Iyengar, Mark Peters, and Donald Kinder, for example, tackled a significant question left unanswered by McCombs and Shaw's research. Because McCombs and Shaw's conclusions were based on comparing aggregated cross-sectional survey data to media content, they were not able to demonstrate that media coverage *caused* voters to consider certain issues more important than others. To explain further, McCombs and Shaw had surveyed Chapel Hill voters at one time (therefore collecting what scientists call cross-sectional data) and then lumped them all together (meaning they aggregated the voters) to compare what voters as a group indicated were their campaign priorities with what issues were covered by the media. Thus, their research was not able to establish that the news coverage *caused* individual voters to consider particular issues important. Why not? Because perhaps it was the case that the media simply reflected the priorities of the voters. The media might have anticipated the interests of voters and therefore covered those issues they thought would draw the largest audience. Figure 3-2 illustrates this conundrum. Thus, the question remains: Do the media cause voters to think certain issues are important, or do voters think certain issues are important and the media cover those issues as a result?

To untangle this causal relationship, Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder conducted an agenda-setting experiment using citizens of New Haven, Connecticut, as subjects.[76] By paying subjects $20 to participate in their experiment, they were able to recruit a group of participants who mirrored the characteristics of New Haven citizens. Six days in a row during November 1980, subjects reported to an office at Yale University that had been transformed into a casual setting for television viewing. The researchers "encouraged participants to watch the news just as they did at home."[77] In this way, they tried to make the context as natural as possible to ensure their results could be generalized beyond the experimental setting.

Figure 3-2   Sorting Out Causal Relationships

Cross-sectional data do not allow us to sort out the causal relationship between two variables. Let's say we see an association between the amount of media coverage of global warming and the importance citizens assign to that issue. Does the association occur because the media coverage causes people to think global warming is important? Or does the association occur because people think global warming is important, which causes the media to devote more attention to the issue? This is known as the reverse causality problem. To solve this problem (and thus establish the direction of the causal arrow), scholars often use experimental research designs.
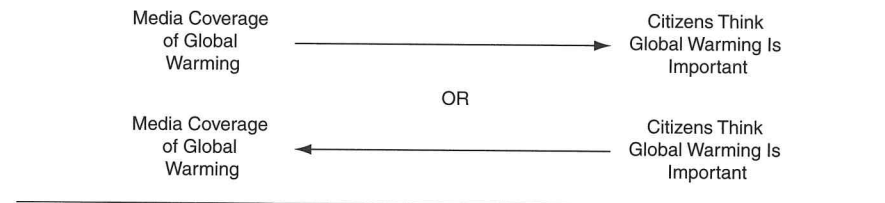
Therefore, by recruiting a mix of people to participate in their study and creating a comfortable setting for watching the news, Iyengar et al. took steps to ensure their experiment was high in external validity.

When the subjects arrived on the first day, they were asked to complete a questionnaire on political topics. Embedded in this survey were questions that asked subjects to rate the importance of several national problems. Over the next four days, subjects watched videotapes of the prior evening's network newscast, or so they thought. On the last day, subjects completed another questionnaire that repeated the problem-importance questions.

Now, there are three crucial details here. First, the newscasts were not truly from the night before. Instead, the experimenters created newscasts based partially on what had been shown the night before but with specific types of stories either added or deleted. Second, the experimenters created two different versions of the newscast. In one version, stories describing problems with U.S. defense capabilities were inserted in the middle of the broadcast, whereas no such stories were included in the other version. Thus, the researchers had complete control over the characteristics of the experimental treatment (the newscasts). And third, subjects were randomly assigned to view either the newscasts that emphasized weaknesses in U.S. military preparedness or the newscasts that did not mention the issue. In other words, it was chance alone that determined whether subjects saw the defense-related news stories or whether they saw newscasts without those stories. As a result of this random assignment, the subjects in the two conditions were essentially the same. Overall, then, this process of random assignment of subjects to conditions and experimenter control over the treatment ensured that the only

difference between the two groups was that one viewed newscasts with the defense stories and the other did not. Thus, if the subjects in the two conditions expressed different opinions on the final questionnaire, we know that it is due to the experimental treatment because all other factors were held constant.

And, indeed, this was just the case. Subjects who viewed the newscasts emphasizing the problems with U.S. military preparedness changed their opinions and rated defense issues as much more important in the postexperiment questionnaire than in the initial questionnaire. Before viewing the newscasts, the subjects ranked defense as the sixth most important out of eight problems. After watching the newscasts, defense jumped to the second most important problem. Furthermore, their attitudes on the importance of other issues did not change, and subjects in the control condition did not change their ranking of the importance of defense as a national problem.

Priming. In addition to studying agenda setting, Iyengar and colleagues examined media **priming effects** in these two experiments.[78] The researchers hypothesized that the issues emphasized by the media would become the same issues citizens used to evaluate political leaders. For example, if the media covered defense topics, then a president's performance on that issue would become a salient factor shaping opinion toward the president in general. This is exactly what they found. After viewing stories on the inadequacies in the defense system, subjects' views of President Jimmy Carter on *that issue* were a stronger predictor of their overall evaluation of Carter than in the condition in which subjects did not see stories on defense. In other words, the defense stories *primed* citizens to evaluate the president along those lines.

In addition to priming issues, the media can also highlight particular traits, such as experience or competence, on which citizens will evaluate political leaders. For example, a recent study by Jody Baumgartner, Jonathan Morris, and Natasha Walth examined the effect of Tina Fey's *Saturday Night Live* (*SNL*) impersonation of Sarah Palin on public opinion.[79] Baumgartner et al. hypothesized that *SNL*'s parody of Sarah Palin's debate performance primed citizens to view her as an "uninformed political novice,"[80] which would negatively affect their opinion of her and the likelihood they would vote for John McCain. To test this hypothesis, the researchers conducted an online panel survey of young adults during the 2008 campaign season. Their sample was not a representative one, but Baumgartner et al. argue that it is nonetheless informative because young people are the primary consumers of political humor. By comparing survey respondents who saw the *SNL* skit of Palin's debate performance to those who were exposed to other media coverage of the debate (and by taking into account respondents' prior attitudes toward Palin), the researchers found that those who viewed the *SNL* spoof were more likely to disapprove of Sarah Palin as McCain's vice-presidential candidate and less likely to say they would vote for McCain as a result of her nomination. Interestingly, viewing the *SNL* skit did not have much influence on the attitudes

of Democrats, probably because they had already found reasons to dislike Sarah Palin. Among Republicans and independents, however, Palin's image suffered as a result of viewing Tina Fey's impersonation.

Framing. In addition to agenda setting and priming, scholars have also identified media **framing effects**. Framing is defined as "the process by which a communication source, such as a news organization, defines and constructs a political issue or public controversy."[81] Media frames identify which aspects of a problem are relevant and important, and they imply which characteristics of a problem are not significant. They also influence which aspects of a story are remembered.[82] A framing effect occurs when media frames influence public opinion on the issue being framed. To illustrate frames and framing effects, we turn to another classic study conducted by Shanto Iyengar.[83]

Iyengar examined television news framing of poverty between 1981 and 1986. He identified 191 poverty-related stories on CBS, NBC, and ABC news during this period. The stories were framed in either episodic or thematic terms. *Episodic frames* focused on individual poor people, whereas *thematic frames* emphasized poverty as a societal problem. For example, an episodic story on poverty might focus on a young single mother who is trying to make ends meet after losing her job. In contrast, a thematic story might discuss the nation's poverty rate. Obviously the topic of both stories is poverty, but one focuses your attention on the characteristics of the poor person, whereas the other leads you to think about poverty as a problem faced by the country as a whole. Iyengar found that the episodic frame dominated news coverage during the early to mid-1980s—two-thirds of the stories on poverty were framed in terms of particular victims of poverty.

Do these media frames influence public opinion? Iyengar answered this question by conducting an experiment to test whether the different frames influenced how people assign responsibility for poverty. Iyengar recruited subjects from the Suffolk County, New York, area and paid them $10 to watch a twenty-one-minute videotape containing seven news stories. Subjects were randomly assigned to view either a thematic or episodic story on poverty, which was embedded as the fourth story in the broadcast. After viewing the video, subjects completed a questionnaire asking about responsibility for the problem of poverty. Specifically, to measure *causal responsibility*, individuals were asked, "In your opinion, what are the most important causes of poverty?"[84] And to measure *treatment responsibility*, individuals were asked, "If you were asked to prescribe ways to reduce poverty, what would you suggest?"[85] Iyengar then coded up to four responses for each question. The responses fell into one of two categories, citizens assigning responsibility either to individual poor people or to more general societal factors.

Did the frames influence how citizens attributed responsibility for poverty? Indeed they did. Subjects exposed to the episodic frame were significantly more likely to hold individuals responsible for causing and treating their own poverty and less likely to point to societal factors. The reverse occurred when subjects were

exposed to the thematic frame; when the coverage emphasized the general phenomena of poverty, citizens were more likely to point to societal causes and solutions and less likely to hold individuals responsible for their poverty. Ironically, media coverage that highlights individual people and their plight leads citizens to point the finger of blame at the poor themselves. Overall-then, the dominance of the episodic frame in media coverage of poverty has clear implications for how citizens think about the issue.[86]

Another important aspect of Iyengar's study is the influence of race on public opinion. In the episodic framing condition, Iyengar also varied whether the poor person depicted in the news story was black or white. When the poor person was black, subjects were significantly more likely to indicate that poor people should solve their own problems and less likely to point to societal solutions for poverty. Thus, citizens' responses to poverty are at least partially driven by whether the poor person is black or white.

Thomas Nelson, Rosalee Clawson, and Zoe Oxley also examined media framing effects, but they took the research a step further by specifying the psychological mechanism that leads to such effects.[87] These scholars studied media coverage of a Ku Klux Klan (KKK) rally held in Chillicothe, Ohio. They identified two frames used by local television news stations to cover the event: *free speech* and *public order*. A newscast using the free speech frame emphasized the right of the KKK to speak and included images of KKK leaders speaking before a microphone. Several Klan supporters were interviewed and said they wanted to hear the KKK's message. One man said, "I came down here to hear what they have to say and I think I should be able to listen if I want to."[88] In contrast, a newscast with the public order frame focused on the possibility that violence would erupt at the rally between protestors and the KKK. The news story included images of police officers standing between the Klan members and the protesters. A bystander who was interviewed said, "Here you have a potential for some real sparks in the crowd."[89]

To examine what impact these frames had on tolerance for the KKK, Nelson et al. conducted an experiment using actual news coverage of the rally. They recruited college students enrolled in introductory political science courses to participate in the experiment. These subjects were randomly assigned to view either the free speech frame or the public order frame and then were asked to complete a survey that included a variety of questions, including two measuring tolerance for the KKK. The first question asked, "Do you support or oppose allowing members of the Ku Klux Klan to hold public rallies in our city?" The second asked, "Do you support or oppose allowing members of the Ku Klux Klan to make a speech in our city?"[90] Subjects responded on 7-point scales ranging from *strongly oppose* (1) to *strongly support* (7). Those exposed to the free speech frame were significantly more likely to support the KKK's right to rally and speak than those in the public order condition (see Figure 3-3). The free speech frame increased political tolerance for the KKK by more than one-half of a point on a

Figure 3-3   Political Tolerance by Framing Condition
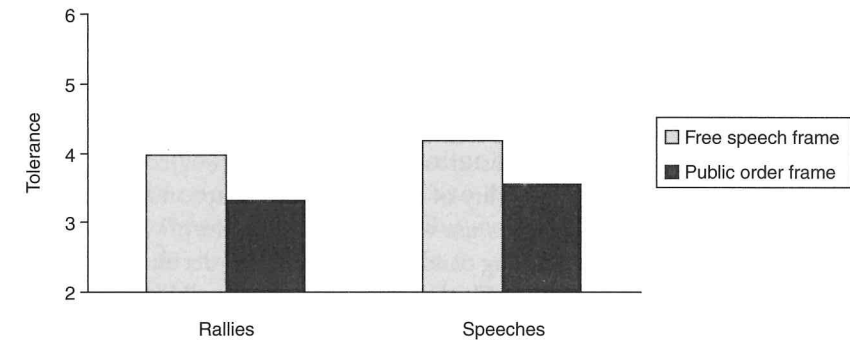
Source: Data from Thomas E. Nelson, Rosalee A. Clawson, and Zoe M. Oxley, "Media Framing of a Civil Liberties Conflict and Its Effect on Tolerance," *American Political Science Review* 91 (1997), 572.

Note: Higher numbers on 7-point scales indicate greater tolerance.

7-point scale. This is both a statistically and substantively significant increase in support for the KKK's right to participate in the public arena.

Nelson et al. also collected data in their experiment to understand the psychological mechanism leading to these framing effects. Previous scholars had hypothesized an **accessibility model** to explain why priming and framing effects occur. This perspective emphasizes that citizens are limited information processors operating in a complex political world. Because there is no way people can deal with all the information in their environment, they make judgments based on the most readily available considerations. The political context, such as news frames, makes certain concepts more accessible than others. In turn, these accessible concepts influence how citizens evaluate the issue that is being framed. For example, the free speech frame makes concepts such as freedom and liberty accessible. Thus, when citizens are asked whether the KKK should be allowed to rally after exposure to the free speech frame, freedom and liberty are uppermost in their minds. These accessible concepts encourage citizens to support the KKK's rights. At least that is the mechanism according to the proponents of the accessibility model.

Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley, however, suggest an **importance model** instead. They argue that not all equally accessible concepts have an equal effect on political evaluations. In other words, just because freedom and liberty are accessible does not mean they will automatically influence citizen judgment. Nelson et al. propose a more thoughtful model of information processing, which says that citizens will judge some accessible concepts more important than others. And those important or relevant concepts will be the ones that influence opinion.

To test these competing hypotheses, Nelson et al. randomly assigned subjects to either an accessibility or importance condition. In the accessibility condition, subjects were asked to respond to series of letter strings flashed on their computer screens. Subjects had to indicate whether each letter string was a word or a non-word. The task included words made accessible by the free speech frame (such as freedom, liberty, independence, and rights) and by the public order frame (such as violence, disorder, danger, and disturbance). How quickly subjects responded to the words indicates the accessibility of the words. This reaction time task is a standard method that psychologists use to measure accessibility.[91] Nelson et al. found that, regardless of the framing condition, the public order and free speech concepts were equally accessible. Thus, differences in accessibility could not explain why subjects were more tolerant in the free speech framing condition than in the public order framing condition.

Nelson and colleagues provide evidence, however, that the importance model explains how framing effects occur. In the importance condition, subjects were asked to evaluate the importance of certain values related to free speech and public order. For example, subjects were asked to indicate "how IMPORTANT each of these ideas is to you when you think about the question of whether or not the Ku Klux Klan should be allowed to make speeches and hold demonstrations in public": "Freedom of speech for all citizens is a fundamental American right" and "There is always a risk of violence and danger at Ku Klux Klan rallies."[92] The researchers found that public order values were deemed significantly more important after exposure to the public order frame and that free speech values were viewed as slightly more important in the free speech framing condition. As a result, these important values were weighted more heavily when determining support for the KKK's right to participate. In sum, frames influence which values citizens view as most important to the matter at hand, which leads to changes in public opinion regarding the issue.[93]

This research offers a more redeeming view of citizens. Rather than being buffeted around willy-nilly by whichever considerations are made most salient by a media frame, as suggested by the accessibility model, citizens engage in a more thoughtful process of weighing the importance of certain values as they form their opinions.[94]

Much of the work on framing effects has been done using experimental methods. Experiments, of course, are wonderful tools for testing causal hypotheses, but they are often more limited when it comes to generalizability because many experiments are conducted on college students. Paul Kellstedt's research on the impact of media framing on racial attitudes provides evidence that framing effects occur beyond the experimental laboratory, thus bolstering the case for the generalizability of these effects.[95]

Kellstedt argues that many citizens hold conflicting core values that influence their thinking on issues of race. On the one hand, citizens value *egalitarianism*; they believe everyone is of equal worth and should be treated the same before the law. On the other hand, citizens value *individualism*; they believe that people should get ahead through their own efforts and should pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. When it comes to racial policy preferences, egalitarians are more likely to support government activities designed to ensure blacks have the same opportunities as whites to succeed, whereas individualists are more likely to oppose such activities. But many citizens hold both values to be dear, so how do they figure out whether to support or oppose government programs intended to assist blacks? Kellstedt argues that citizens rely on egalitarian and individualist cues from the media to help determine their racial policy preferences.

To test this hypothesis, Kellstedt began by examining news coverage of race. Specifically, he content analyzed egalitarian and individualism frames in *Newsweek* stories on race between 1950 and 1994. He found that egalitarianism was a common frame during the 1960s but became less so after the mid-1970s. In contrast, individualism cues were fairly rare until the late 1970s, at which point they were used with greater regularity. The number of individualism cues peaked in the early 1990s.

Next, Kellstedt pulled together aggregate public opinion data on racial issues from this same period by relying on surveys from a variety of polling organizations. He showed that public opinion on issues of race fluctuated a great deal during this roughly forty-year period. Citizens were significantly more liberal on racial issues in the mid-1990s than they were in the early 1950s, but there was by no means a constant march in the liberal direction. Instead, we might think of the pattern as a dance step: for every two steps forward, you take one step—and sometimes more—back.

Last, Kellstedt compared the longitudinal data on media framing with these longitudinal public opinion data. He found that changes in media framing of values explain variations in racial policy preferences across time. When the egalitarian frame became more prominent in the media, citizens' racial attitudes became significantly more liberal. In contrast, the individualism frame led to slightly more conservative racial policy opinions. Thus, Kellstedt's "real-world" research confirms what many experimental researchers have found in the laboratory—media frames influence public opinion.

In sum, agenda setting, priming, and framing constitute what are known as subtle media effects. Researchers in this tradition have not found the widespread persuasion effects suggested by the hypodermic model, nor is their evidence consistent with the minimal effects model. Instead, researchers have shown how the media can influence public opinion by (1) affecting what the public thinks about,

(2) affecting which issues shape evaluations of leaders, and (3) affecting which considerations are viewed as most important when assessing a political issue.

Limits on Subtle Effects

Are there limits on subtle media effects? Can the media set the agenda to such an extent that we would consider them to be controlling the agenda? Can the media prime issues so much they overwhelmingly determine how candidates and politicians will be judged? Can the media frame political issues and therefore manipulate public opinion? These are important questions that emerge out of the research on subtle effects.

James Druckman moves us toward answering these questions by examining whether there are limits on framing effects.[96] Specifically, he asks, *who* can successfully frame an issue? He argues that citizens look to trusted, credible elites for guidance when determining their issue positions. Therefore, credible communication sources should be able to effectively frame public opinion, while less credible sources should not be able to do so. Druckman set up an experiment to test this hypothesis using a college student sample. He first identified two ways in which assistance to poor people is framed: government expenditures or humanitarianism. The *government expenditures frame* focuses on how providing money to the poor increases government spending, whereas the *humanitarian frame* emphasizes the needs of poor people. Subjects were randomly assigned to read one of those two frames and were then asked to provide their opinion on a 7-point scale regarding whether Congress should increase or decrease assistance to the poor. If the framing effect works, we would expect subjects in the humanitarian condition to be more supportive of spending on poor people than subjects in the government expenditures condition.

There is one more crucial detail, however. Druckman also varied whether the frames were presented by a credible or noncredible source. To identify a credible source and a noncredible source, Druckman conducted a pretest in which he asked participants—also college students—to rate seven people according to how trustworthy and knowledgeable they were about the issue at hand. The seven people were Colin Powell, Ross Perot, Bill Maher, Bob Dole, Geraldo Rivera, Dennis Miller, and Jerry Springer. The participants selected Colin Powell as the most trustworthy and knowledgeable and Jerry Springer as the least.

Based on that pretest, Druckman created (what looked to be) statements from either Colin Powell's Web site or Jerry Springer's Web site. Thus, the assistance-to-the-poor frames were attributed to either Colin Powell in the high-credibility condition or Jerry Springer in the low-credibility condition. If framing effects depend on the credibility of the source, as hypothesized by Druckman, then we would expect subjects in the humanitarian condition to be more supportive of assistance to the poor than subjects in the government expenditures condition *only* when the statement is attributed to Colin Powell. And that is exactly what

Figure 3-4   Support for Assistance to the Poor by Framing Condition by Source Expertise
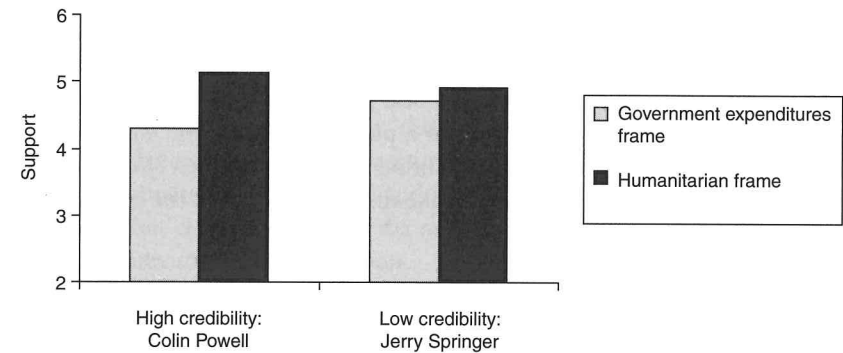
Source: Data from James N. Druckman, "On the Limits of Framing Effects: Who Can Frame?" *Journal of Politics* 63 (2001), 1051.

Note: Higher numbers on 7-point scales indicate greater support for assistance to the poor.

Druckman found. His results are presented in Figure 3-4. Subjects who read the humanitarian message from Colin Powell were significantly more supportive of spending on the poor than subjects who read a Colin Powell government expenditures message. In contrast, subjects exposed to a Jerry Springer message were only slightly more likely to support assistance for the poor in the humanitarian condition than in the government expenditures condition. The difference was not statistically significant. Therefore, returning to Druckman's original question: Who can successfully frame an issue? Credible sources can frame an issue.

As with Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley's research on framing effects, Druckman's study provides a more redeeming view of citizens. His study shows that citizens are not simply the victims of manipulation on the part of elites; instead, citizens react to cues that make sense—whether the elite is a credible source. We might be worried, for example, if citizens' opinions on crime policy were influenced by a Jerry Springer show on "how my mother stole my jailhouse boyfriend," but it seems much more reasonable for citizens to look to people such as Colin Powell for guidance on critical issues of the day.

Finally, recent work by Dennis Chong and James Druckman reminds scholars that the real world of politics may put limits on framing not apparent in most research on framing effects.[97] In actual political debates, frames rarely go uncontested. Competing frames are part and parcel of political discourse. In many framing studies, however, participants are exposed to one-sided messages and then almost immediately asked their opinions on the issue at hand. Perhaps not surprisingly, researchers find that the messages shape public opinion. But what happens

when citizens are faced with competing frames over the course of a policy debate or political campaign that might last weeks or months? Although the findings on this topic are quite complex, the simple answer is that when citizens are exposed to competing frames at one time, the messages tend to cancel each other out. When citizens receive messages at different times, however, they weigh the most recent message more heavily in their political judgments. Chong and Druckman conclude that, if you are an advocate of a particular frame, you would be well served to promote your message *early* to influence initial attitudes, *often* to combat other competing messages, and *late* to make sure your message is the last one heard by the public.[98]

CONCLUSION

Do the mass media live up to democratic ideals? Overall, participatory democratic theorists would say no. In a perfect world, the media should be free from government and economic control, and they should inform and educate the public, provide a forum for diverse views, and hold government officials accountable. The reality is much different. The media in the United States are best characterized by the three Cs: corporate, concentrated, and conglomerate. Soft news is on the rise, and tabloid journalism is increasingly influential. Further, adherence to news norms often results in news that is biased toward the perspectives of powerful officeholders. Participatory democratic theorists would argue, however, that all is not lost because nonprofit media, the minority press, and the Internet offer alternatives to the dominance of conglomerates.

Elite democratic theorists have a much different view about whether the media live up to democratic ideals. Compared with participatory democratic theorists, they have much lower expectations for citizens in a democracy, and as a result, they also have much lower expectations for the media. Because the media are relatively free from government control and provide citizens with enough information to go to the polls and cast a ballot, elite democrats are pleased. The influence of economic forces, the emphasis on official sources, and the increase in soft news and tabloid journalism simply do not raise the same concerns for elite democrats.

Are citizens influenced by the mass media? The answer to that question has changed over time. Scholars originally proposed a hypodermic model of media effects, which said that the media were extremely powerful and would persuade unsophisticated citizens with their messages. This model went by the wayside, however, when little evidence was found to support it. Next, the minimal effects model emerged. This model argued that citizens would filter media messages through their preexisting attitudes. Instead of converting citizens to a new point of view, media messages were more likely to reinforce and activate current predispositions.

Most recently, scholars have found substantial evidence to support a subtle effects model of media influence. This tradition argues that the media influence

citizens through agenda setting, priming, and framing; the media influence what citizens think about, which issues or traits citizens bring to bear when evaluating political leaders, and which considerations shape their thinking on political issues.

Overall, both participatory and elite democratic theorists can find things to like about the subtle effects model. On the one hand, elite democrats would find it natural for citizens to take cues from the media. Citizens are not expected to follow politics day in and day out; thus, it makes sense that the media would provide guidance for what issues are important and how politicians and issues should be evaluated. On the other hand, participatory democratic theorists would be pleased that citizens take in media messages in a thoughtful way and do not simply fall prey to elite manipulation.

KEY CONCEPTS

accessibility model / 93	neutrality / 81
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SUGGESTED SOURCES FOR FURTHER READING

Gans, Herbert J. *Deciding What's News*, 25th anniversary ed. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2004.

This classic book uses content analysis and participant observation to understand how news organizations and journalists decide what is news.

Iyengar, Shanto, and Donald R. Kinder. *News That Matters*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

In a series of experiments, these authors provide evidence of agenda setting, priming, and framing effects.