public opinion, and the resolution of issues and events. As outlined earlier, a key dilemma facing American democracy is that even as citizens become less central to the news picture, the same old media logic has remained central to the process of governing with the news.

GOVERNING WITH THE NEWS

Political communication scholar Tim Cook described the processes through which politicians and journalists have become so inseparable as "governing with the news."[40] Politicians need to get their positions into the news to establish themselves as movers and shakers in the Washington image game and to signal to their backers and voters that they are visible and active leaders. Observing the rise of news management in governance, CNN pollster and pundit William Schneider described Washington as a town of individual political entrepreneurs whose success and power often depend on their media images. Those images can be boosted when they are associated with the popularity of other visible politicians, like a winning president, or with popular developments, such as economic booms or successful wars.[41] When the president appears to be a loser, other politicians are less eager to be associated with him or his programs. As the news tracks these image games, opinion polls beyond the beltway often reflect (and validate) the spin.

Journalists in this system receive a fresh and economical daily supply of news, along with insider status and professional respect when they land the big interviews and inside scoops. Journalist Marvin Kalb described these perverse developments in "press-politics:"

> . . . there isn't a single major and sometimes minor decision reached at the White House, reached up on the Hill, reached at the State Department or the Pentagon, that does not have the press in mind. The way in which this is going to be sold to the American people is a function of the way in which the press first understands it, and then accepts it, and then is prepared to propagate a certain vision to the American people.[42]

What is ironic in this process is that despite the often-fierce competition for these inside tidbits, the overall results display relatively little variation in stories across the mainstream media. Even organizations with a political point of view, such as FOX *News* or MSNBC start with much the same topics, but favor the spin from one end of the political spectrum over the other. Cook concluded that the similarity of approaches to covering the news and the homogeneity of content across the thousands of mainstream news organizations support the idea that the news media (despite the plurality of the term *media*) operate as a single political institution, covering much the same territory with much the same result. He described this as "the abiding paradox of newsmaking: News professes to be fresh, novel, and unexpected, but is actually remarkably patterned across news outlets and over time. Rather than providing an unpredictable and startling array of happenings, the content of news is similar

from day to day, not only in featuring familiar personages and familiar locales, but also in the kinds of stories set forth and the morals these stories are supposed to tell."[43] The mutual dependency of journalists and officials in the production of news means that this institution of the press—even though protected in its freedom and independence by the Constitution—in fact amounts to a fourth, and not so independent, branch of government.

The ability or inability of officials to make and control the news is an important part of the power to govern, as reflected in the capacity of news to (a) shape public opinion among those citizens still paying attention; (b) sway different political factions to join or oppose political initiatives, such as going to war or addressing climate change; (c) hold officials more or less accountable for those initiatives; and (d) simply inform citizens about what the government is doing. At the forefront of information politics is the struggle over influencing or *spinning* journalists and news organizations to report versions of events that favor particular political sides. A case in point is the selling of the Iraq War.

HOW THE NEWS WENT TO WAR IN IRAQ

Few episodes in modern history illustrate the power of spin more than selling the Iraq War to the media and, in turn, to other politicians and the American people. Within a year of the attacks of September 11, 2001, the Bush administration rolled out a well-designed marketing campaign to link 9/11 to Iraq.[44] The United States was already waging a far more credible war with broad international support in Afghanistan. The fight there was against a government that supported al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden, who were clearly linked to the attacks on America. There was little evidence that Iraq was similarly involved. Nonetheless, the president and other high administration officials began a public relations offensive to create the impression that there was a link between Iraq and that terrible day when airliners full of passengers were hijacked and flown into the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon.

The news mix was enriched with allegations that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction. Officials appeared on Sunday news interview programs and punctuated their arguments with images of mushroom clouds. Those erroneous claims would later become material for late-night comedians, who joked about "weapons of mass deception." Did the Bush administration intentionally deceive the public? Or were the president and his advisors so determined to go to war that they deceived themselves? These questions may never be answered to the satisfaction of the historians who will surely be investigating them. But we can answer the questions of how such dubious claims came to dominate the headlines and how winning the image battle helped win broader support in Washington power circles for the war. The scary images that filled the news dominated the headlines and chilled political opposition. A number of leading Democrats, including presidential aspirants, such as John Kerry (2004) and Hilla
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such as John Kerry (2004) and Hillary Clinton (2008), made strategic decisions to support the war, and then found themselves compromised in their future efforts to oppose it.

Long after the war failed its advertised promise of an easy victory with an open-armed welcome from liberated Iraqi citizens, Americans still had only dim understandings about what happened and why. How was it, for example, that the invasion and occupation of Iraq became part of the war on terror? There were early news reports that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had found no clear link between Saddam Hussein and the al-Qaeda network that orchestrated the events of 9/11. To the contrary, Osama bin Laden had branded Saddam's secular regime a threat to Islamic fundamentalism. Far more evidence linked al-Qaeda with backers in Saudi Arabia.[45] However, the Saudis were official allies of the United States, and their links to 9/11 were displaced in the mainstream news by the single-minded focus on Iraq. With few opposition voices appearing in the news, the war was soon on.

The news was filled with breathless battlefield accounts from reporters embedded in military units. Images of Saddam's statue toppling in Baghdad overshadowed reports that the Bush administration had distorted the case it presented. The few news stories that challenged Saddam's connection to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 or questioned whether he was developing nuclear weapons could not compete for public attention with the daily spin of the administration. On May 1, 2003, President George W. Bush made his dramatic tailhook landing on the aircraft carrier *Abraham Lincoln* to declare "mission accomplished." That "top gun" moment was a media event supreme—designed to capture huge news audiences for the president's ringing sound bite: "The battle of Iraq is one victory in a war on terror that began on September 11, 2001, and still goes on."[46]

Months turned into years, and the battle of Iraq was still going. Triumphal media images became threatened by a civil war that soon took more American lives than the invasion itself, and Iraqi civilian casualties numbered many times the human loss of the 9/11 attacks. Meanwhile, the war in Afghanistan turned ugly, with the resurgence of the Taliban and the growing instability in neighboring Pakistan. In response, the administration stepped up its news management operation, questioning the patriotism of critics and the negativity of the media and continuously hammering home the claim that "Iraq has become the central front on the war against terror."[47]

Beyond the loose facts and the foggy justification for the war, one thing became clear afterward: The battle for control of news images was the most important factor in shaping support both for the war and for the Bush administration's capacity to govern effectively for several more years after the invasion. The first media victory was predictably inside the beltway, among elected officials, where opinion matters most. As the government dominated the media imagery, opponents shrank from challenging the war. The few who spoke out were relegated to the back news pages, if reported at all. From the viewpoint of the mainstream press, they were minority voices on the losing side of a policy decision. The second line of symbolic victory was over the

American public, who grew increasingly attentive to an issue as big as waging war against an alleged terrorist nation.

With so few opposition voices in the news, who and what were the American people to believe? When administration dominance of news was at its peak around the time of the invasion in early 2003, fully 69 percent of the public felt that an Iraq connection to 9/11 was at least somewhat likely. Thanks to continuing administration domination of the news, solid majorities of Americans continued to believe that Iraq had something to do with the events of 9/11 long after facts to the contrary had come to light.[48] And close to a majority (47 percent) substantially overestimated levels of European public support for the U.S. invasion. In fact, popular support among all major U.S. allies was extremely low—even in Britain, which participated in the invasion and occupation.

The misinformation among Americans was considerable, with 24 percent of those polled believing that weapons of mass destruction had been found in Iraq even after U.S. military teams had searched the country to no avail. Although support for the war finally began to decline amid the growing post-invasion chaos and evidence of poor planning on the part of the administration, fully 41 percent continued to believe that Saddam had something to do with al-Qaeda, reflecting the continuing newsmaking power of prominent members of the administration.[49]

When Barack Obama took charge of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, he made the fateful choice to escalate the Afghan conflict, much to the dismay of many Americans who began to withdraw support for the costly and lengthy conflicts at a time of economic crisis at home. Following a troop escalation, the unpleasant sacking of the general who engineered it, and discouraging reports from the front, polls showed only 26 percent of Americans thought the U.S. was winning the Afghan conflict.[50] Why does it seem so much easier to manage the news with the aim of selling policies than to use the news to explore the credibility of the policies in the first place? Why is it so often that when critics look back on policy failures, they find that they were so poorly deliberated in public, and based on such incomplete or inaccurate evidence?

WHAT ABOUT EVIDENCE? AN UNCOMFORTABLE TRUTH ABOUT JOURNALISM

Like the reporting on the run up to the Iraq War, many politically heated stories raise troubling questions about what journalists should do when officials say things that are inconsistent with available evidence to the contrary. In the case of selling the war, the question is whether one side of a story should be made so dominant just because other officials in government are afraid or unwilling to challenge it. There are other variations on this dilemma. What if there are two sides to a story being debated within official circles of power, but one is likely not true? For example, many years after the scientific community had reached consensus that global warming was accelerating due to human

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causes, the Bush administration rejected that consensus and got its doubting views into the headlines. This happened despite statements by administration officials that they had been ordered to change scientific reports commissioned by the government to bring them in line with the administration position.[51]

Should both sides of a story be covered when one is likely not true? Should a story be allowed to become one-sided when there is evidence to challenge it, but powerful officials are simply unwilling to voice that evidence? Either way, American journalism does not have easy answers to these important questions. Finding an answer would require freeing the press from its dependence on government and powerful officials as its reference on reality.

Why has the American press become caught in this curious dependence on what those in power say about reality? I have termed this reporting pattern *indexing*, which refers to the tendency of mainstream news organizations to index or adjust the range of viewpoints in a story to the dominant viewpoints of those in political institutions who are perceived to have enough power to affect the outcome of the situation.[52] This curious reporting system, as explained further in Chapter 5, is a result of the longstanding commitment of the mainstream press to cling to a norm of balance, fairness or objectivity. If the journalists seek to appear objective or balanced, they cannot become involved in interpreting or telling the audience what is going on. Rather, journalists must channel views of reality through external sources, and the safest sources are those who have the power to shape political outcomes. (The advent of more politically explicit news accompanied by the distortion of facts to fit preferred views of reality will be discussed in the next chapter.)

What this reporting system means is that when government is working well, and elected representatives are offering competing alternatives for solving policy problems, the news is filled with competing views that may help engaged citizens think critically about decisions facing the nation. On the other hand, if certain factions in power promote deceptive or untruthful spin in the service of powerful interests, then those ideas also become presented as equally valid alongside more plausible versions of events. Similarly, if political parties decide not to raise doubts about bad ideas—either because they are not easy to explain to inattentive publics, or they might be rejected by emotionally aroused publics—then bad ideas become the dominant news frames. If journalists introduced independent evidence to balance such stories they would be accused of bias or of campaigning for their own agendas. And so, spin rules.

Consider a couple of cases in point. Even though few doubts existed in the scientific community about the seriousness or the clear human causes of global warming, the Republican Party generally adopted a public relations strategy during the early 2000s based on raising doubts about the scientific consensus. The result was that for a critical decade when much of the rest of the world was taking action to combat global warming, the news in the U.S. was indexed in a way that "balanced" those who urged reducing dependence on carbon fuels with another side to the story claiming that the science on the matter was not settled. (This episode is discussed in more detail in the case study in Chapter 4). To return to the example of the war, when the Democratic Party

decided not to challenge a then-popular President Bush following 9/11 on the claim that Iraq was implicated in the terrorism attacks, the resulting news was dominated by the administration PR campaign to sell the war. The imbalance in this case again reflected indexing: The mainstream press had no other political power reference point to anchor a sustained challenge to the administration side of the story.

The legacy of the Iraq War raises an uncomfortable truth about the U.S. news system. While many Americans are uninformed because they are inattentive to the news, it may also be the case that paying attention to deceptive news can result in misinformation. In the case of Iraq, some news organizations did a better job than others in helping their audiences critically assess government claims about the war, but most who followed the news from most outlets came away misinformed by the dominant spin. For example, even after claims about weapons of mass destruction and Iraqi links to al-Qaeda had been seriously challenged by sources outside the administration, 80 percent of the viewers of FOX *News* still shared one or more of these factual inaccuracies about the war, while only 23 percent of Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and National Public Radio (NPR) audiences were similarly mistaken. Other mainstream news sources misinformed people at rates closer to FOX than NPR, with CBS at 71 percent, ABC at 61 percent, NBC at 55 percent, and CNN at 55 percent—the average of print news sources had a reader misperception rate of 47 percent.[53]

Even the best news organizations left large numbers of people misinformed. It also appears that the more mainstream or popular news organizations were least likely to challenge government propaganda. The point here is not that journalists were making up facts but that most news organizations simply emphasized what powerful official sources told them, even though other credible sources were available to challenge those accounts of reality.

These confusions of reality and power may undermine the credibility of news for many citizens. As journalists become spun by officials and join the establishment by sharing often short-lived conventional wisdoms, power becomes the definer of truth. Instead of having a news system that speaks truth to power, the dictates of power produce a news product that comedian Stephen Colbert has referred to as "truthiness."

CASE STUDY

The "Truthiness" About News

Comedian Stephen Colbert coined the term *truthiness* to refer to the many political statements that officials introduce into the news that are not entirely consistent with available evidence—evidence that journalists often have trouble introducing independently unless other officials contest the spurious claims. Thus, the news often conveys mainly the trappings of truth: a sincere sense of conviction and all the authoritativeness that earnest

officials and journalists can provide. Yet import
missing. This appearance of truth while importa
"truthiness." The missing reality bits make it p
Jon Stewart to point out the frequent political

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> The aide said that guys like me were "in wha
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> reality. And while you're studying that reality
> again, creating other new realities, which you
> sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you,
> we do."[54]

It is fortunate for democracy that politics stil
even goodwill may become blinded by strong conv
views. In these moments, the press seems unable
political blindness. Consider an exchange between
Stewart during an interview on ABC's *Nightline* pr
interview format in which journalists preside betw
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> . . . she throws out her figures from the Herita
> from the Brookings Institute, and the anchor, v
> says, "Thank you both very much. That was rea
> Coke and Pepsi talking about beverage truth. A
> caused people to go, "I'm not watching this."[55]

As Dannagal Young points out in her analysis o
rejects the premise that the journalist's role is to

officials and journalists can provide. Yet important elements of reality often seem to be missing. This appearance of truth while important evidence is left out of the picture is "truthiness." The missing reality bits make it possible for political comics like Colbert and Jon Stewart to point out the frequent political follies that officials offer as serious news.

Behind the production of journalistic truthiness is the implicit recognition by powerful figures and their media advisors that what they say in the news generally cannot be challenged effectively by journalists unless they find another Washington source of comparable power or status to do the job. This confusion of power and credibility can lead some politicians to take considerable liberties with the truth in pursuit of strong convictions.

The point here is not that most journalists do not know any better, or do not try to set the record straight. Indeed, many journalists do not take this lying down. As a result, the interplay of press and politicians is often testy and adversarial. The game at press conferences and interviews often becomes one of trying to get officials to reconcile their spin with observable realities. Consider a revealing moment during an interview between Ron Suskind, a prominent journalist, and a senior presidential advisor who grew tired of the cat and mouse game of journalists trying to get him to admit to inconsistencies in the official script. The official suddenly dismissed the journalist as belonging to the "reality-based community." Suskind recalls the revealing moment in these terms:

> The aide said that guys like me were "in what we call the reality-based community," which he defined as people who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality." I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. "That's not the way the world really works anymore," he continued. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do."[54]

It is fortunate for democracy that politics still attracts many people of goodwill. But even goodwill may become blinded by strong convictions that block out the reality of other views. In these moments, the press seems unable to make independent corrections for political blindness. Consider an exchange between veteran journalist Ted Koppel and Jon Stewart during an interview on ABC's *Nightline* program. Stewart described a typical news interview format in which journalists preside between two sides that often miss larger realities:

> . . . she throws out her figures from the Heritage Foundation and she throws her figures from the Brookings Institute, and the anchor, who should be the arbiter of the truth says, "Thank you both very much. That was really interesting." No, it wasn't! That was Coke and Pepsi talking about beverage truth. And that game is what has, I think, caused people to go, "I'm not watching this."[55]

As Dannagal Young points out in her analysis of this interview, ". . . Stewart explicitly rejects the premise that the journalist's role is to present opposing sets of facts from

Continued

official sources. Instead, he argues that ignoring the underlying truth-value of those 'facts' denies viewers an important critical analysis of political life, and instead the journalist should act as an 'arbiter of the truth.'"[56] As the interview continued, Koppel seemed a bit wistful about the freedom that comedy gives Stewart to point out deception, or BS as Koppel put it, yet he firmly denied that it was the role of journalists to issue such corrections:

KOPPEL: Those who watch you say at least when I'm watching Jon, he can use humor to say, "BS." You know, "That's a crock."

STEWART: But that's always been the case . . . Satire has always. . . .

KOPPEL: Okay, but I can't do that.

STEWART: No. But you *can* say that's BS. You don't need humor to do it, because you have what I wish I had—which is credibility, and gravitas. This is interesting stuff. And it's all part of the discussion, and I think it's a good discussion to have, but I also think that it's important to take a more critical look. Don't you think?

KOPPEL: No.[57]

Dannagal Young argues that this greater capacity to get at the truth—or at least point out deception and spin—makes comedy "the new journalism." Meanwhile, journalists remain trapped in a system that is largely of their own making. This odd evolution of a mainstream news system that requires official sourcing to sustain critical or challenging points of view was the subject of one of Stephen Colbert's most controversial comedy routines when he addressed the annual dinner of the national press club, an insider affair that had become one of the top A ticket events in Washington due to the attendance of the elite press corps and many powerful politicians, generally including the president. Colbert first took on President Bush, and then the press.

> . . . ladies and gentlemen of the press corps, Madame First Lady, Mr. President, my name is Stephen Colbert, and tonight it is my privilege to celebrate this president, 'cause we're not so different, he and I. We both get it. Guys like us, we're not some brainiacs on the nerd patrol. We're not members of the factinista. We go straight from the gut. Right, sir?. . . .
>
> And as excited as I am to be here with the President, I am appalled to be surrounded by the liberal media that is destroying America, with the exception of FOX News. FOX News gives you both sides of every story: the President's side, and the Vice President's side.
>
> But the rest of you, what are you thinking? Reporting on NSA wiretapping or secret prisons in Eastern Europe? Those things are secret for a very important reason: they're super-depressing. . . .
>
> Over the last five years you people were so good, over tax cuts, WMD intelligence, the effect of global warming. We Americans didn't want to know, and you had the courtesy not to try to find out. Those were good times, as far as we knew.
>
> But, listen, let's review the rules. Here's how it works. The President makes decisions. He's the decider. The press secretary announces those decisions, and you people of the press type those decisions down. Make, announce, type. Just put 'em through a spell check and go home. Get to know your family again. Make love to your wife. Write that novel you got kicking aroun intrepid Washington reporter with the c know, fiction![58]

Colbert may have hit the mark too clos in the audience seemed to be laughing as t *Post* later panned the performance, saying t former media critic and now a political col Colbert fell flat not because he was rude to to the capital press corps, whom he caricat Washington audience failed to find the joke heavy price for the press's failure to challe laughed until it hurt."[59] As Rich noted, eve the performance spread virally on the Inter YouTube, and one of the most popular iPod

Having dismissed this moment of painfu embarrassment, and invited comedian Rich Little had been popular on television in the performance as ". . . an apolitical nightclub flop."[60]

The two-year run of fawning attitude by *New York Times* to decide to stay away from problem of truthiness remained unaddresse mainstream news organizations. As Frank entire profession yet understands why it has

A DEFINITION OF NEWS

The impact of news on the quality of communication scholar Bruce Bimber American politics: that it is biased t political information.[62] Bimber follow of American democracy from *The F* information regimes. The first great came with the rise of a national mail s publications, perhaps making the U.S tion for expanding democracy in the forward to the late twentieth century the information regime of the mass Technologies, such as broadcast te enabled Americans to share commo nation. Politicians in the mass media using the media to deliver messages di

As the mass media information worry that multiplying media niches

> Write that novel you got kicking around in your head. You know, the one about the intrepid Washington reporter with the courage to stand up to the administration? You know, fiction![58]

Colbert may have hit the mark too closely, as neither the president nor many reporters in the audience seemed to be laughing as the event was aired on CSPAN. The *Washington Post* later panned the performance, saying that Colbert "fell flat." However, Frank Rich, a former media critic and now a political columnist for the *New York Times,* guessed that Colbert fell flat not because he was rude to the president, but "His real sin was to be rude to the capital press corps, whom he caricatured as stenographers. Though most of the Washington audience failed to find the joke funny, Americans elsewhere, having paid a heavy price for the press's failure to challenge the White House propaganda about Iraq, laughed until it hurt."[59] As Rich noted, even as the national press failed to see its humor, the performance spread virally on the Internet, becoming an overnight sensation on YouTube, and one of the most popular iPod downloads.

Having dismissed this moment of painful insight, the press club vowed not to repeat its embarrassment, and invited comedian Rich Little to do the routine the following year. Little had been popular on television in the 1970s. Frank Rich described Little and his performance as ". . . an apolitical nightclub has-been (who) was a ludicrously tone-deaf flop."[60]

The two-year run of fawning attitude by the national press club toward power led the *New York Times* to decide to stay away from future dinners. However, the more general problem of truthiness remained unaddressed by journalists and managers at most mainstream news organizations. As Frank Rich concluded, ". . . it's far from clear that the entire profession yet understands why it has lost the public's faith."[61]

A DEFINITION OF NEWS

The impact of news on the quality of democracy is always changing. Political communication scholar Bruce Bimber makes a bold assertion about power in American politics: that it is biased toward those with the best command of political information.[62] Bimber follows this claim by tracing the development of American democracy from *The Federalist* to the present day in terms of information regimes. The first great expansion of democratic participation came with the rise of a national mail system that carried many newspapers and publications, perhaps making the U.S. Post Office the most important institution for expanding democracy in the early American republic.[63] If we flash forward to the late twentieth century, American democracy evolved through the information regime of the mass media, which is now in its late stages. Technologies, such as broadcast television and satellite communication enabled Americans to share common experiences that affected the entire nation. Politicians in the mass media age became experts at "going public" by using the media to deliver messages directly to large audiences.[64]

As the mass media information regime begins to erode, many observers worry that multiplying media niches may produce individuals who become

informed just about issues and perspectives that suit their personal lifestyles and beliefs. Can a democracy with so many exclusive, personalized media realities have coherent policy discussions, much less, share a common purpose?[65] At the very least, we should bring the news down to earth and recognize that it is continually changing, and that these changes are shaped by a chaotic set of factors that may not engineer an information product with the best interests of democracy in mind.

How do the somewhat chaotic interactions among political actors, publics, and the press affect the way we define the news? As a starting point, it makes sense to adopt a simple definition of political news as:

- What newsmakers (politicians and other political actors) promote as timely, important, or interesting . . .
- from which news organizations select, narrate, and package . . .
- for delivery to people who consume and use it in various ways from entertainment to political action.

Doris Graber suggests that news is not just any information, or even the most important information, about the world; rather, the news tends to contain information that is *timely,* often *sensational* (scandals, violence, and human drama frequently dominate the news), and *familiar* (stories often drawing on familiar people or life experiences that give even distant events a close-to-home feeling).[66] In this view, the news is constructed through the constantly changing interactions of journalists, politicians, and people seeking ends that are sometimes similar and sometimes very different. While journalists are often regarded as "gatekeepers" who screen information according to its truth and importance, it is important to recognize the impact of power and influence on this gatekeeping process. Above all, it helps to notice that the news gates open and close differently depending on how power balances are struck on different issues at different times.

GATEKEEPING: WHO AND WHAT MAKE THE NEWS

Understanding who makes the news begins with recognizing that each news story can contain only a selection of the voices, facts, and organizing ideas that might be involved in understanding a particular issue or event. *Gatekeeping* is a term often used to refer to *whose voices and what messages get into the news*. Journalists and, more important, their news organizations make choices about what to cover and how to report it. Some stories may feature statements by ordinary citizen-activists and interest organizations, whereas most news reports leave most of the talking to government officials. Gatekeeping decisions are made only in part by individual journalists. In a big story, many of these decisions are made directly by editors and executives in news organizations. These organization-level decisions, in turn, are influenced by economic pressures, audience reactions, and a host of other considerations that all go into the construction of the daily news.

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In an ideal world, journalists might find the sources representing the most insightful and diverse points of view. These ideal news sources would try to engage their opponents in convincing debate aimed at helping the public decide the best course of action. And the ideal public would want to take the time to learn about different approaches to important social issues. In the real world, many factors work against these ideals of democracy, from business pressures in news organizations to lazy citizens and deceptive politicians.

For all of its flaws, the American information system can produce impressive levels of good information and public deliberation, leading publics and policymakers to helpful understandings of complex social problems.[67] Issues receiving such rich news deliberations most often tend to be personal matters, from moral values to jobs and taxes, over which there is considerable public conflict. Sociologist William Gamson cites abortion as an issue that has attained impressive levels of information quality and diversity of public viewpoints, resulting in sophisticated public opinion responses to complex policy questions.[68] Abortion is also one of those political issues that has spilled outside the bounds of news, becoming the subject of movies and television programs, church sermons, talk shows, and conversations among friends. On many other issues, however, the public is often in the dark. Gamson cites a continuum of other issues that tend to be less citizen-friendly than abortion. In his view, part of what marks the difference between high- and low-citizen involvement is whether the news reports grassroots collective citizen action surrounding issues, a factor that encourages other citizens to get involved by seeing an issue from the standpoint of ordinary people who are concerned about it.[69]

The presence or absence of citizen voices depends largely on whether journalists find powerful government officials or established interests that endorse those grassroots views. As noted earlier, I have coined the term *indexing* to refer to the journalistic practice of opening or closing the news gates to a broad or narrower range of views according to levels of public conflict among the powerful officials and established interests involved in making decisions about an issue. When open conflict breaks out among key decision makers (e.g., Congress vs. the president on energy policy), the news gates will open to broader social voices, from grassroots activists to interest organizations.[70]

Indexing mainly helps us understand how the news organizes the policy world of legislation, executive action, court decisions, and issue debates. When breaking events, crises, or dramatic scandals occur, more fluid news patterns may develop—with the news becoming a national story teller, cultural interpreter, and sometimes even cheerleader for human triumphs over adversity. For example, in the days immediately following 9/11, the news replayed the images of a plane hitting the World Trade Center, the towers collapsing, brave rescue workers trying to save lives, and a nation grieving. In such rare moments, the news becomes a collective screen on which grand images of fear, loss, grief, patriotism, and hope are projected. News organizations produced dramatic stories of a people under siege, responding bravely, and rising from the ashes to deal with the terrorist challenge. Within days,

however, the government began to act decisively in waging war and passing new domestic security laws, and the news returned to its familiar focus on government. Indexing comes in at this point to help explain the "truthiness" problem described earlier in the selling of the Iraq war. Because this implicit journalism rule anchors mainstream news coverage around what powerful decision-makers are saying, the result is not always be the most helpful or truthful versions of reality. Indeed, much of what officials say is aimed at creating pre-conceived political realities, reminding us what the role of an independent press might be in a democracy: to expose fateful decisions, such as those surrounding the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to more enlightening public discussion before they occur.

The centrality of spin in the gatekeeping process opens the news to loss of confidence on the part of citizens along with ridicule by comedians. Stories easily spill beyond the news and into entertainment programming in ways that seem to further diminish the capacity of the press to authoritatively develop perspectives on what is important and why it matters. Communication scholars Michael Delli Carpini and Bruce Williams suggest that for many stories, the news has become a secondary information source behind TV dramas or late-night comedy monologues. They go so far as to suggest that the once-hallowed gatekeeping function of the news may be dissolving as politics spills outside the bounds of news and throughout other media formats that are better suited to telling dramatic and entertaining stories.[71] In a new work, these authors describe the end of the mass media television-centered news regime, and the rise of a much more chaotic public information order. In their view, the new order gives rise to the serious question, "Is there a difference between Tina Fey and Katie Couric?"[72] Despite its increasingly chaotic state, the news remains the core of our political information system. It is important to understand how this system works from the standpoints of its key actors: the press, politicians, and the people.

POLITICIANS, PRESS, AND THE PEOPLE

The three major actors in the news process—politicians, journalists, and the public—occupy quite different positions in both the political system and the communication system. Despite the differences in these actors' political worlds, each set of players contributes important elements to the construction of what we call news. The next sections introduce brief snapshots of the news politics of politicians, journalists, and the public.

Politicians: Spin Rules

From the standpoint of the politicians, businesses, and interest organizations that largely define politics in America, it has long been clear that power and influence depend on the control and strategic use of information. Despite growing public skepticism, newsmaking continues to be the most important way to get issues on the public agenda. The idea of *agenda setting* involves

using the news to influence what the
think about in society and politics.[73]
ing for public relations, politicians fro
to abortion activists, environmentalist
go public by finding ways to take thei
irony of mediated politics is that bein
public agenda often means taking cues
frame stories around their partisan vie
works, the news not only tells people w
what to think.[76]

The digital age may challenge the
media because people can more easily
personal sources on the issues that mat
for politicians to reach people with t
information independence and greater
cal actors have trouble reaching the pu
hire communication professionals, wh
by designing sophisticated strategies f
of the public.[77] Democratic theorist R
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The Press: Commercialism and the

As noted in the opening of this chapt
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sensationalism, cheap lifestyle features
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tion consultants. These trends are disc
examples at this juncture illustrate ho
around quality journalism.

When billionaire investor Sam Ze
took control of the *Chicago Tribune*,
other papers and television stations. M
Zell cheerfully admitted that he was
make this investment for any other rea
first targets he announced was to get r
gance," which he described as treating
tomers.[80] By 2010, the parent compa
bankruptcy, and the paper sold a "fake
advertise a movie.[81]

This trend toward gutting serious (a
motion for over 20 years, with devastat