How much television do you watch each day? Little or none? Two hours a day? Three hours? More? However much you watch, you no doubt know that your peers spend a great deal of time in front of the TV. Studies show that by the time the average person graduates from high school today, he or she has spent nearly 11,000 hours in classrooms and nearly 14,000 hours watching television. On average today, high school students watch more than twenty hours of television programming each week.

Television has an extraordinary impact on the lives of everyone in this country. So do all of the other elements of the mass media.

The Role of Mass Media

A medium is a means of communication; it transmits some kind of information. Media is the plural of medium. The mass media include those means of communication that can reach large, widely dispersed audiences simultaneously.

Four major mass media are particularly important in American politics. Ranked in terms of impact, they are television, newspapers, radio, and magazines. Other media—books, films, and audio- and video-cassettes, for example—play a lesser role. So, too, does the Internet, though its communicating capabilities are becoming increasingly important.

The mass media are not a part of government. Unlike political parties and interest groups, they do not exist primarily to influence government. They are, nonetheless, an important force in politics.

Besides providing entertainment, the media present people with political information. They do so directly when they report the news, in a newscast or in the news columns of a newspaper, for example. The media also provide a large amount of political information less directly—for example, in radio and television programs, newspaper stories, magazine articles, and blogs. These venues often deal with such public topics as crime, health care, or some aspect of American foreign policy. Either way, people acquire most of the information they know about government and politics from the various forms of media.

Television

Politics and television have gone hand in hand since the technology first appeared. The first public demonstration of television occurred at the New York World’s Fair in 1939. President Franklin Roosevelt opened the fair on camera.

Objectives

You may wish to call students’ attention to the objectives in the Section Preview. The objectives are reflected in the main headings of the section.

Bellringer

Ask whether they have ever been “spammed.” Have a volunteer explain what “spam” is, in Internet jargon. (unsolicited e-mail, often sent in bulk) Tell students that the ability to communicate simultaneously with a widely dispersed audience is common to all forms of mass media—the topic of this section.

Vocabulary Builder

Point out the terms in the Political Dictionary. Help students explore the multiple meanings of the term medium, and then have them explain the image that comes to mind when they read the term sound bite.

Lesson Plan

Teaching the Main Ideas

1. Focus

Tell students that Americans acquire most of their political information from the mass media. Ask students to discuss what they know about the four major mass media and how they influence politics.

2. Instruct

Ask students which mass medium is the principal source of political information for most Americans. Discuss the popularity of television and how it influences American politics. Extend the discussion to the other major mass media.

3. Close/Reteach

Remind students that the mass media provide political information in different ways. Have students summarize how each of the four major mass media might present the story of a presidential candidate’s tour of your state.
Reading Strategy

Accessing Prior Knowledge

Before students begin reading, ask them to recall any political information they have acquired recently via television, radio, newspapers, and magazines. Have them think about the information and how it was presented. Tell them that they will learn more about the role of the mass media in politics as they read the section.

Point-of-Use Resources

Guided Reading and Review Unit 2 booklet, p. 30 provides students with practice identifying the main ideas and key terms of this section.

Lesson Planner For complete lesson planning suggestions, see the Lesson Planner booklet, section 3.

Background Note

Common Misconceptions

Most Americans know that the television networks are private businesses which make money by selling time for commercials, and that they are free, under the 1st Amendment, to broadcast a stunning variety of shows. But few Americans realize that the networks are required, by law, to broadcast news. Under the Communications Act of 1934, the Federal Government granted broadcast licenses on the condition that the networks serve the “public interest, convenience, and necessity”—which, for decades, meant airing news shows.

Organizing Information

To make sure students understand the main points of this section, you may wish to use the tree map graphic organizer to the right.

Tell students that a tree map shows a main topic, its main ideas, and its supporting details. Have students use the tree map to record information about each of the types of mass media.

Teaching Tip A template for this graphic organizer can be found in the Section Support Transparencies, Transparency 3.

and local viewers watched him on tiny five- and seven-inch screens.

World War II interrupted the development of the new medium, but it began to become generally available in the late 1940s. Television boomed in the 1950s. The first transcontinental broadcast came in 1951, when President Harry Truman, speaking in Washington, addressed the delegates attending the Japanese Peace Treaty Conference in San Francisco.

Today, television is all-pervasive. As you read earlier, there is at least one television set in 98 percent of the nation’s 110 million households. In fact, there are more homes in this country today with a television set than with indoor plumbing facilities!

Television replaced newspapers as the principal source of political information for a majority of Americans in the early 1960s. Today, television is the principal source of news for an estimated 80 percent of the population.

The more than 1,700 television stations in this country include more than 1,400 commercial outlets and over 300 public broadcasters. Three major national networks have dominated television from its infancy: the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), the American Broadcasting Company (ABC), and the National Broadcasting Company (NBC). Those three giants furnish about 90 percent of the programming for some 700 local stations. That programming accounts for about 45 percent of all television viewing time today.

The major networks’ audience share has been declining in recent years, however. The main challenges to their domination have come from three sources: (1) several independent broadcasting groups—for example, the Fox Network; (2) cable broadcasters—for example, Turner Broadcasting, and especially its Cable News Network (CNN); and (3) the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) and its more than 350 local stations.

Some of the most highly touted presentations on television—a Super Bowl game, for example, or a debate between the major presidential candidates—are seen by as many as 100 million people. From 15 to 40 million watch the more popular sitcoms. Each of the three major network’s nightly news programs draws 7 to 10 million viewers. In addition, more than 80 million places, including nearly three fourths of the nation’s households, are now hooked up to cable systems.

C-SPAN, the Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network, is sponsored by the cable industry. C-SPAN, C-SPAN2, and C-SPAN3 cover a broad range of public events—including major floor debates and committee hearings in Congress, presidential and other press conferences, and speeches by notable public figures.

Shaping Public Opinion

West Berlin mayor Willy Brandt is interviewed in 1961 on Meet the Press, television’s first and longest running talk show (left). On Larry King Live Larry King speaks with Attorney General John Ashcroft about the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks (right).
Newspapers

The first regularly published newspaper in America, the Boston News-Letter, appeared in 1704. Other papers soon followed, in Boston and then in Philadelphia, New York, Annapolis, and elsewhere. By 1775, 37 newspapers were being published in the colonies. All of them were weekly papers, and they were printed on one sheet that was usually folded to make four pages. The nation’s first daily newspaper, the Pennsylvania Evening Post and Daily Advertiser, began publication in 1783.

Those first papers regularly carried political news. Several spurred the colonists to revolution, carrying the news of independence and the text of the Declaration to people throughout the colonies. Thomas Jefferson marked the vital role of the press in the earliest years of the nation when, in 1787, he wrote to a friend:

“...were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.”
—Letter to Colonel Edward Carrington, January 16, 1787

The 1st Amendment, added to the Constitution in 1791, made the same point regarding the importance of newspapers with its guarantee of the freedom of the press.

Today, more than 10,000 newspapers are published in the United States, including almost 1,450 dailies, more than 7,200 weeklies, some 550 semi-weeklies, and several hundred foreign-language papers. Those publications have a combined circulation of about 150 million copies per issue. About 45 percent of the nation’s adult population read a newspaper every day, and they spend, on average, a half hour doing so.

The number of daily newspapers has been declining for decades, however, from more than 2,000 in 1920 to 1,745 in 1980 and to not quite 1,450 today. Radio and television, and more recently the Internet, have been major factors in that downward trend.

So, too, have been the battles over readers and advertisers that competing papers have fought in many places nationwide. Often, those struggles have left only one survivor. Competing daily papers exist in fewer than 50 cities today. This represents a major change from only a few decades ago, when at least two and sometimes three, four, or five newspapers existed in most major cities.

Nevertheless, newspapers rank second only to television as the public’s primary source of information about government and politics. Most newspapers cover stories in greater depth than television does, and many try to present various points of view in their editorial sections. Those newspapers that have the most substantial reputations and national influence today include the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Chicago Tribune, the Los Angeles Times, the Wall Street Journal, USA Today, and the Christian Science Monitor.

Most newspapers are local papers. That is, most of their readers live in or near the communities in which they are published. While local papers do carry some national and international news, most focus on their own locales.

Advances in telecommunications and computerized operations are changing that basic fact.

Preparing for Standardized Tests

Have students read the passages under Newspapers and then answer the question below.

What is the main reason for the decline in the number of newspapers published?

A People are not interested in local papers.
B Newspapers are too political.
C Newspapers only express one point of view.
D Newspapers must compete with television and other media.

Answer to . . .

Interpreting Graphs Although Internet use has grown dramatically over the last several years, students should recognize that other media probably will always have a place in news dissemination, just as radio remained popular even after the advent of television.
Differentiated Instruction

Have students prepare a two-page “Guide for Using the Mass Media to Find Out About Public Issues” that would be useful for a newcomer to the United States. Ask them to include the names of newspapers, magazines, and TV and radio networks with local channels and radio frequencies. The guide should provide brief descriptions of what each source offers relating to public issues. ELL

Make It Relevant

Students Make a Difference

Sheryl Anayas calls her internship at the Teen Environmental Media Network “an amazing experience.” At TEMN, Sheryl got to try just about all aspects of radio journalism, including interviewing, writing scripts, selecting “cuts” for 90-second audio reports, recording her own narration, and editing audio digitally. “I learned to produce environmental audio and text reports independently,” Sheryl says, and her audio reports were broadcast on the San Francisco Unified School District’s radio station.

TEMN is sponsored by EECOM, a county-level coalition of environmental and community groups, schools, and businesses, which uses radio and the Internet to inform the public about environmental issues. According to founder Jerry Kay, TEMN hopes to train “the next generation of science and environmental journalists.”

Answer to...

Interpreting Graphs: Possible answer: the increase in the number of stations may provide opportunities for expressing new messages.

Radio

Radio as it exists today began in 1920. On November 2nd of that year, station KDKA in Pittsburgh went on the air with presidential election returns. Radio soon became immensely popular.

By 1927, 733 commercial stations were on the air, Americans owned more than seven million radio sets, and two national networks were in operation. NBC was established in 1926 and CBS in 1927. The Mutual Broadcasting System was formed in 1934, and ABC was formed in 1943. The advent of networks made it possible for broadcasters to present their programs and advertising messages to millions of people all over the country.

By the 1930s, radio had assumed much of the role in American society that television has today. It was a major entertainment medium, and millions of people planned their daily schedules around their favorite programs. The networks also provided the nation with dramatic coverage of important events, and radio exposed the American people to national and international politics as never before.

President Franklin Roosevelt was the first major public figure to use radio effectively. Author David Halberstam has described the impact of FDR’s famous fireside chats:

“He was the first great American radio voice. For most Americans of [that] generation, their first memory of politics would be of sitting by a radio and hearing that voice, strong, confident, totally at ease. . . . Most Americans in the previous 160 years had never even seen a President; now almost all of them were hearing him, in their own homes. It was literally and figuratively electrifying.” —David Halberstam, The Powers That Be

Many people thought that the arrival of television would bring the end of radio as a major medium. Radio has survived, however, in large part because it is so conveniently available. People can hear music, news, sports, and other radio programs in many places where they cannot watch television—in their cars, at work, in the country, and in a number of other places and situations.

Radio remains a major source of news and other political information. The average person hears 20 hours of radio each week. No one knows how many radios there are in this country—in homes, offices, cars, backpacks, and a great many other places. Those radios can pick up some 14,000 stations on the AM and FM dials.

Many AM stations are affiliated with one or another of the national networks. Unlike television, however, most radio programming is local. There are also some 700 public radio stations, most of them on the FM dial. These noncommer-
An uninformed public: the media's fault?

Any number of studies demonstrate this point: Overall, the American people are not very well informed about politics and public affairs. Some analysts claim that the media are largely responsible for this regrettable fact—because, they say, the media are much more interested in entertaining their audiences than they are in informing them. Most critics also note that "the news" tends to be negative in tone. That is, bad news regularly crowds out good news—and this, they say, leads many people to ignore, or at least fail to appreciate, the significance of news reports about public affairs.

. . . Or the public's fault?

Other observers argue that the public itself is to blame for its lack of knowledge and awareness. They say that virtually every aspect of public affairs is covered by the news media, on an ongoing basis. The problem here is that, by and large, most people don't pay close attention to the news about public affairs—that is, don't bother to inform themselves.

Any Questions?

What would you like to know about the mass media? Brainstorm two new questions and exchange them with a classmate. What did you learn?

The muckrakers were journalists who exposed wrongdoing in politics, business, and industry. The term was coined by Theodore Roosevelt in 1906 and is derived from the raking of muck—that is, manure and other barnyard debris. The muckrakers set the pattern for what is now called investigative reporting.

### Frequently Asked Questions

**The Media**

**The Enduring Constitution**

Judicial Review, p. 7

**Close Up on the Supreme Court**


**Basic Principles of the Constitution**

Transparencies 37–43, Judicial Review

**Activity**

Have students read the *New York Times v. United States* case in the Close Up on the Supreme Court booklet in the Teaching Resources. Remind them that the government's reason for the injunction was that disclosing the papers would risk national security. Ask students whether they agree with the Court's decision. Had the Court ruled differently, how might the mass media be different today?
Chapter 8 • Section 3

Differentiated Instruction L2

Ask students to keep a log of all the public or political issues that are referred to as they are watching one evening of television, excluding news broadcasts. Point out that political issues may be referred to in comedy or drama shows, talk shows, public interest messages, music videos, and even commercials. Have students compare their findings in class.

Background Note

Media Influence

According to a study published by the Annenberg Public Policy Center in late September 2004, most Americans were unaware at that time of the presidential candidates’ positions on many major issues. For example, at least half of those surveyed could not correctly identify John Kerry and George W. Bush’s positions on Social Security, jobs, and taxes. Interestingly, those who watched late-night comedy shows such as those hosted by David Letterman, Jay Leno, and Jon Stewart knew more about the candidates and their positions than those who did not watch such programs. Young viewers of the Daily Show with Jon Stewart scored particularly well on campaign knowledge—even better than young people who watched network news programs, and just as well as those who watched cable news programs or read newspapers.

Point-of-Use Resources

ABC News Civics and Government Videotape Library
Lyndon Johnson’s Daisy Girl Commercial (time: one minute)

The Media and Politics

Clearly, the media play a significant role in American politics. Just how significant that role is, and just how much influence the media have, is the subject of a long, still unsettled debate.

Whatever its weight, the media’s influence can be seen in any number of situations. It is most visible in two areas: (1) the public agenda and (2) electoral politics.

The Public Agenda

The media play a very large role in shaping the public agenda, the societal problems that the nation’s political leaders and the general public agree need government attention. As they report and comment on events, issues, policies, and personalities, the media determine to a very large extent what public matters the people will think and talk about—and, so, those matters that public-policy makers will be concerned about.

To put the point another way, the media have the power to focus the public’s attention on a particular issue. They do so by emphasizing some things and ignoring or downplaying others. For example, they feature certain items on the front page or at the top of the newscast and bury others.

It is not correct to say that the media tell the people what to think; but it is clear that they tell the people what to think about. A look at any issue of a daily newspaper or a quick review of the content of any television news program will demonstrate that point. Remember, people rely on the media for most of the information they receive on public issues.

The mass media also has a direct impact on the nation’s leaders. Some years ago, Stephen Hess, a widely respected authority on the media, identified several news organizations that form the “inner ring” of influence in Washington, D.C. He cited the three major television networks, CBS, ABC, and NBC; three newspapers, the New York Times, the Washington Post, and the Wall Street Journal; the leading news wire service, the Associated Press (AP); and the three major news weeklies, Time, Newsweek, and U.S. News & World Report. CNN, MSNBC, Fox News, Reuters and USA Today have since joined that select group.

Top political figures in and out of government pay close and continuing attention to these sources. In fact, the President receives a daily digest of the news reports, analyses, and editorial comments that these and other sources broadcast and publish.

Electoral Politics

You have seen several illustrations of the media’s importance in electoral politics as you have read this book. Recall, for example, the fact that the media, and in particular television, have contributed to a decline in the place of parties in American politics.

Television has made candidates far less dependent on party organizations than they once were. Before television, the major parties generally dominated the election process. They recruited most candidates who ran for office, and they ran those
candidates' campaigns. The candidates depended on party organizations in order to reach the voters.

Now, television allows candidates to appeal directly to the people, without the help of a party organization. Candidates for major office need not be experienced politicians who have worked their way up a party's political ladder over the course of several elections. Today it is not at all unusual for candidates to assemble their own campaign organizations and operate with only loose connections to their political parties.

Remember, too, that how voters see a candidate—the impressions they have of that candidate's personality, character, abilities, and so on—is one of the major factors that influence voting behavior. Candidates and professional campaign managers are quite aware of this fact. They know that the kind of “image” a candidate projects in the media can have a telling effect on the outcome of an election.

Candidates regularly try to manipulate media coverage to their advantage. Campaign strategists understand that most people learn almost everything they know about a candidate from television. They therefore plan campaigns that emphasize television exposure. Such technical considerations as timing, location, lighting, and camera angles loom large, often at the expense of such substantive matters as the issues involved in an election or a candidate's qualifications for public office.

Good campaign managers also know that most television news programs are built out of stories that (1) take no more than a minute or two of air time, and (2) show people doing something interesting or exciting. Newscasts seldom feature “talking heads,” speakers who drone on and on about some complex issue.

Instead, newscasts featuring candidates are usually short, sharply focused sound bites—snappy reports that can be aired in 30 or 45 seconds or so. Staged and carefully orchestrated visits to historic sites, factory gates, toxic-waste dumps, football games, and the like have become a standard part of the electoral scene.

**Limits on Media Influence**

Having said all this, it is all too easy to overstate the media's role in American politics. A number of built-in factors work to limit the media's impact on the behavior of the American voting public.

For one thing, few people follow international, national, or even local political events very closely. Many studies of voting behavior show that in the typical election, only about 10 percent of those who can vote and only about 15 percent of those who do vote are well informed on the many candidates and issues under consideration in that election. In short, only a small part of the public actually takes in and understands much of what the media have to say about public affairs.

Moreover, most people who do pay some attention to politics are likely to be selective about it. That is, they most often watch, listen to, and read those sources that generally agree with their own viewpoints. They regularly ignore those sources with which they disagree. Thus, for example, many Democrats do not watch the televised campaign appearances of Republican candidates. Nor do many Republicans read newspaper stories about the campaign efforts of Democratic candidates.

**Voices on Government**

Joseph Turow, a professor at the Annenberg School of Communications, studies the ways in which the media influence our political perspectives. Turow examines the mass media—from radio to the Internet—and their impact on people.

“We have to make people a little more sophisticated about video images. . . . News and entertainment are, essentially, a battle over the definition of the world. You’ve got various sources in public relations, and interest groups and political organizations are always maneuvering to have a reporter write this or that, and we don’t know, for example, why this person is on this television show. One of the things I tell my students is to interrogate the newspaper, interrogate the television show.”

**Evaluating the Quotation**

What do you think Turow means by “interrogating” a newspaper or a television news program? How would following his advice change you as a “consumer” of the news?

For another thing, no amount of media analysis can help us to understand the behavior of the A

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**Magruder's American Government Video Collection**

The Magruder’s Video Collection explores key issues and debates in American government. Each segment examines an issue central to chapter content through use of historical and contemporary footage. Commentary from civic leaders in academics, government, and the media follow each segment. Critical thinking questions focus students’ attention on key issues, and may be used to stimulate discussion.

Use the Chapter 8 video segment to examine how film, television, and political commercials are used to mold candidates’ images and shape public opinion. (time: about 5 minutes) This segment uses examples from past and current presidential and other elections to analyze how appearances are manipulated—both in negative campaigning and to increase voter appeal.

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**Background Note**

**Recent Scholarship**

Growing concerns about the quality of media coverage of politics have prompted several studies on the topic. Robert W. McChesney's *The Problem of the Media: U.S. Communication Politics in the Twenty-First Century* is a recent addition to the list. The topic is familiar to McChesney, professor of communications at the University of Illinois and co-editor of *Monthly Review*, and his treatment of it uses a problem/solution approach. The book discusses issues such as the quality of journalism today, bias in the media, problems with public broadcasting, and antitrust legislation and the media. McChesney postulates that today's mass media actually threatens democracy, but he also maintains that this threat has not gone unnoticed by the public. For those who are concerned enough to take action, McChesney offers possible approaches to a meaningful media reform movement.
Another important limit on the media's impact is the content the media carries. This is especially true of radio and television. Most television programs, for example, have little or nothing to do with public affairs, at least not directly. A number of popular programs do relate to public affairs in an indirect way, however. Thus, many are "crime shows," and crime is certainly a matter of public concern. Many also carry a political message— for example, that the police are hard-working public servants.

Advertisers who pay the high costs of television air time want to reach the largest possible audiences. Because most people are more interested in being entertained than in being informed about public issues, few public-affairs programs air in prime time. There are exceptions, however, including 60 Minutes, Dateline, and 360.

Radio and television mostly "skim" the news. They report only what their news editors judge to be the most important and/or the most interesting stories of the day. Even on widely watched evening news programs, most reports are presented in 60- to 90-second time slots. In short, the broadcast media seldom give the kind of in-depth coverage that a good newspaper can supply.

Newspapers are not as hampered as many other media in their ability to cover public affairs. Still, much of the content of most newspapers is nonpolitical. Like nearly all of television and radio, newspapers depend on their advertising revenues, which in turn depend on producing a product with the widest possible appeal. Newspaper readers are often more interested in the sports pages and the social, travel, advertising, and entertainment sections of a newspaper than they are in its news and editorial pages.

In-depth coverage of public affairs is available in the media to those who want it and will seek it out. There are a number of good newspapers around the country. In-depth coverage can also be found in several magazines and on a number of radio and television stations, including public broadcast outlets. Remember, however, that there is nothing about democracy that guarantees an alert and informed public. Like voting and other forms of political participation, being an informed citizen requires some effort.