Political success depends on getting your message to the public, and one of the most effective ways to do that is to have it presented on the daily news. One way to get the media's attention is to stage an event just for them. Of course, you want to control how the various media present you, so media events tend to be carefully staged and tightly scripted.

Another way to reach the public is via TV commercials. Over half of presidential campaign budgets go to TV commercials, and most ads are negative. Some find the relentless negativity of campaign advertising to be detrimental to the American political process.

Image-making is critical for politicians, especially presidents. Presidential administrations devote much effort to honing their public image and controlling their interactions with the media. They want to be on the news every night, but they want it to be on their terms.

Politicians often stage activities primarily for the benefit of TV cameras. The sight of a major presidential candidate walking the streets asking ordinary people for their support is something that the media will find hard to pass up.

In this swing down a street in Clinton, Iowa, Mitt Romney met perhaps 30 of the 30,000 people who voted for him in the 2012 Iowa caucuses. But the number of people who saw pictures like this in their newspaper or viewed the video footage on TV was far greater.

The president's relationship with the press has changed since the early days of the republic, when there were few daily newspapers and no electronic media. As recently as the Hoover administration, reporters submitted questions to the president in writing and he routinely ignored them. Franklin Roosevelt was the first president to hold press conferences, and John Kennedy was the first to appear in a televised debate.

Through the 1960s, media coverage of the president was deferential. The press would not have considered mentioning Franklin Roosevelt's wheelchair. But the cynicism created by the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal ushered in the present era of investigate journalism, in which no topic, however personal, is off limits, and journalists take an adversarial role.

The White House press secretary battles daily with the press corps. Correspondents try to get ever more information, while the president's spokesperson tries to control the news agenda and spin stories in the administration's favor.

Symbolizing this conflict, President Obama's press secretary Robert Gibbs offered to give members of the press a chance to dunk him in a tank at the annual White House luau one year.

Is such relentlessly negative coverage in the public interest? Some say that an unvarnished look at the candidates is a good thing while others allege that the press focuses on trivialities rather than important policy issues.

The First Amendment guarantee of freedom of the press gave newspapers the ability to air government's dirty laundry, which they've done since the first daily newspaper began in 1783.

Americans who read the news are better informed than those who merely watch or listen to it. Newspaper coverage is more detailed than the much briefer broadcast reports.

Yet, with the rise of electronic media, newspaper circulation has declined dramatically. To stay in business, newspapers have to publish an online edition. However, online copy doesn't generate the same advertising revenue as print. Newspapers have tried to charge for online content but have found that people are simply not willing to pay for it.

Magazines that focus on politics are also finding that their circulation is down and that readers expect online content to be free.

Electronic media have displaced print media as Americans' main source of political information. Radios were everywhere in the 1930s. After World War II, television came along. Television placed new demands upon presidents. Listeners never knew that Franklin Roosevelt was in a wheelchair during his weekly radio broadcasts. When Nixon debated Kennedy in 1960, radio listeners rated Nixon's performance higher, but television viewers preferred Kennedy by a wide margin.

Television made it harder for the government to hide things or mislead the public. During the Vietnam War, television reports gave the lie to the president's assurances that the war was going well.

As first cable channels and then the Internet have given Americans an enormous variety of viewing options, audiences for network news broadcasts have declined. Just as with newspapers, the golden age of network news has come to an end.

In 1934, Congress created the Federal Communications Commission to regulate use of the airwaves. The FCC prevents monopolies by limiting the number of stations owned by one company. This regulation isn't very stringent. No single owner can control more than 35% of the broadcast market, but that's a sizable chunk. The FCC also ensures that all stations serve the public interest, although it is rare for a station to lose its license for failing to do so.

Another FCC rule stipulates that if a station sells advertising to one candidate, it must be willing to sell it to other candidates running for the same office. Also, the right-of-reply rule requires stations to allow anyone who's attacked to be able to respond on the same station, with the exception of news coverage.

The FCC used to have a rule that broadcasters had to give equal time to opposing views on controversial topics, but the advent of cable, with so many channels presenting such a variety of opinions, led to the abolition of that rule.

The first major networks used the term "broadcast" because they meant their programs, including those on government and politics, to appeal to a broad audience. But cable TV changed that. With channels that specialize in cooking, golf, history, and other topics, stations are now engaged in narrowcasting, which is programming targeted to a specific, narrow interest.

An entire generation has now grown up with narrowcasting options. Young people are far less likely to read newspapers or watch broadcast media.

Younger generations rely on humorous shows for information about current events. This blend of information and entertainment is known as infotainment.

With so many channels to choose from in the narrowcasting age, major politicians often agree to interviews on entertainment shows in order to reach people who don't watch the news. Here, Mitt Romney can be seen chatting with Jay Leno on the *Tonight Show.*

Breaking news reported as it is happening gives politicians less control over how situations are framed and spun for public consumption.

Despite the variety of news programs, Americans aren't better informed. The main reason is that news coverage on cable television is incredibly weak. It's simplistic, repetitive, lacks substance, is poorly researched and written, and ignores many important topics.

Cable TV news is also guilty of using outrage to generate attention from viewers. Outrage is stoked by sensationalism, personalattacks, misleading information, or even lies.

In contrast to the days of broadcast news, when viewers of all political opinions obtained their news from the same sources, today's viewers choose programming that is in line with their own political views. This is called selective exposure.

In 2000, the Pew Research Center found that the regular audiences of each of the three major cable news channels were roughly equally divided between Democrats and Republicans. By 2012, Fox News viewers were much more likely to be Republicans than Democrats whereas CNN and MSNBC viewers were much more likely to be Democrats than Republicans.

The Internet makes it much easier for Americans to be politically informed. A quick Internet search will reveal how your representatives voted on policy issues that are important to you. Yet Americans remain unlikely to take advantage of this opportunity to obtain political information. Data on search engine usage shows that people are much more likely to search for information about pop culture than politics, and traffic on political information sites is much lower than on entertainment ones.

Every week, the search engine Lycos lists the search terms that its users have most frequently keyed in to look for information on the Internet. Here you can find the top 25 searches for the week ending September 30, 2008—the week of the first Obama–McCain presidential debate.

How many of the searches relate to political events? Why are politics so peripheral to people's lives?

The biggest impact the Internet has made on politics has been in facilitating communication. Politicians and interest groups can interact directly with the public, and citizens can respond more easily. Political mobilization via the Internet is replacing neighborhood-based party organizations. Meetup and Facebook help bring like-minded activists together.

Blogs have given the general public a forum to express their political views and potentially reach as wide an audience as a professional journalist. But the reality is that it's easy to post on a blog but much harder to generate substantial readership, which means that professionals who write for a recognized news outlet still have an advantage Blogs are playing an increasingly important role in the reporting of political news. In 2005, 23-year-old Garrett Graff, who was writing a blog about the news media in Washington, became the first person to receive a White House press pass for the specific purpose of writing a blog. Here, bloggers cover a candidate's speech during the 2012 presidential primary campaign.

America has a diverse array of media outlets, most of which are privately owned. The few public broadcasting outlets attract only low ratings. In contrast, most other countries have major TV networks that are publicly owned.

Freedom of the press gives journalists in the U.S. the ability to criticize government, and most other democracies carefully guard press freedom even on publicly owned networks. But freedom of the press is rare in non-democratic regimes, such as China, where the government closely controls what the media can say about it.

Public networks are free to serve the public interest without worrying about the size of their audience. But this is not the case with private media.

Although private media have nearly complete control over their content, they need to turn a profit. Advertising revenue supports most media. Therefore, the main objective of media is to get the largest possible audience.

This profit orientation has led to changes in political reporting. Foreign news reporting has declined. Foreign bureaus are expensive to operate, and the public has shown little interest in foreign news. What implications does a lack of foreign news have for American political culture?

Because only the unusual and unexpected are newsworthy, the news gives a distorted view of political events, one that tends to trivialize them and avoid discussion of important issues. When the president attends a state dinner, it is not news, but when the president throws up on the Japanese prime minister, it is talked about all over the news for days. Whatever critical policy issues may be at stake fall by the wayside.

This happens because news reporting is a business. In their pursuit of high ratings, networks dumb down their shows and strive to make them entertaining, not informative. The quest for profit, not a mission to educate the public, defines what's newsworthy.

Reporters are often assigned to cover certain areas of government, such as Congress or the White House. These ongoing assignments are known as a beat.

When politicians want to get a story out, they feed it to the media in the form of a trial balloon, which is a leak designed to gauge public reaction.

Journalists rely on politicians to give them news and politicians rely on journalists to get their message out; politicians and journalists enjoy a symbiotic relationship. But sometimes government restricts journalistic access to prevent unfavorable news getting out, usually during wartime. When this happens, journalists are quick to cry censorship and call the public's attention to it.

Occasionally, political reporting uncovers a gross miscarriage of justice, such as an illegal pollution dump, corruption, or an innocent prisoner sitting on death row. Such stories can lead the government to act to fix the situation. They can also lead to a Pulitzer Prize in journalism.

Television news must fit into short segments or sound bites, ensuring that coverage is superficial, often little more than headlines. Complex policy issues such as Medicare reform cannot be given meaningful treatment in such brief time frames.

Politicians cannot present issues to the public when their 20-minute speeches are edited down to 8-second sound bites. While this is frustrating for them, it also helps them avoid addressing issues and lets them focus on photo opportunities and other image-making but substance-free endeavors.

Presidents used to be able to count on major network coverage of their speeches, but now such coverage is shunted to cable news, and a smaller audience.

The media are often accused of having a liberal bias. Studies have shown no systematic bias to the left or right, but it is undeniable that journalists themselves are more likely to be liberal than conservative, and that most news outlets are based in cities.

The one bias that is seen in the news is toward stories that will draw a bigger audience. News outlets strive to be entertaining, not informative, and the public is drawn to stories that involve conflict, violence, disaster, or scandal. Stories must also have visual appeal. Viewers tend to change the channel if they see only a talking head on the screen. This emphasis on violence and chaos gives people a certain impression of the world in general, and politics in particular.

The clearest and most consistent bias in the news is the focus on sensational stories. When Jerry Sandusky was arrested on sex abuse charges, the media gave far more coverage to this story involving sports at Penn State than to stories going on at the time that involved complex issues, such as the European debt crisis, the debate over health care, or unrest in the Middle East.

Since 1986, a monthly survey has asked Americans how closely they have followed major news stories. As one would expect, stories involving disaster or human drama have drawn more attention than have complicated issues of public policy.

It's difficult to measure the impact of news stories on public opinion. The effect of any one story is hard to separate from the cumulative effects of dozens of news stories, and from other sources of information.

Scholars haven't traced much of a direct impact between media and how people vote, but they've found that the media affect what issues the public thinks about. That is, the media play an important role in setting the political agenda.

By shaping what people think is important, the media set the criteria by which the public evaluates political leaders. If the president commits one gaffe in an otherwise successful diplomatic mission, his approval rating will be affected by whether the media choose to highlight the gaffe or the accomplishments. The media tend to focus on misstatements that presidents make, which contributes to public mistrust of government competence and reliability.

The media are slightly influential in voting choices and quite influential in presidential approval ratings. However, the media are by far the most influential in agenda-setting. By choosing what problems and issues to cover, the media determine what political issues the public thinks are important.

The political agenda is the set of issues to which the public and the government are paying attention at a given time. Many groups are pushing for their priorities to get onto the political agenda.

People who invest capital to open a business are known as entrepreneurs, and political activists who invest political capital to get their ideas on the political agenda are known as policy entrepreneurs. Political activists try to use the media to bring public attention to their issues.

It isn't only political elites who have access to the media. Protests by the poor and downtrodden attract media coverage as well. One thing that activists can't control is the slant to the coverage, that is, whether it will show their cause in a good light for public consumption.

Events like protests draw the media. Political activists usually alert the local, and sometimes national, media when they're planning a protest to ensure that reporters and cameras will be there.

The media link policymakers and the public. They are the public's source of information about government. So how the media portray what the government's doing becomes critical to public perception. The same act of government can be perceived by the public as a failure or a success depending solely upon how it's portrayed in the media.

The media's role as watchdog keeps the behavior of politicians in check, and a majority of Americans think this is a good thing. Reporters themselves tend to have a negative view of public officials as self-serving, hypocritical, lacking integrity, and focused exclusively on reelection. They see debunking politicians as a critical part of their job.

Since the media treat every new policy proposal and government program with skepticism, they constrain the scope of government. Yet at the same time the media highlight problems and injustices and ask what the government's going to do about them. Portraying the government as responsible for solving every problem has the effect of enlarging the scope of government.

Television gives the public the opportunity to evaluate political candidates directly. Individual voters can get an "up close and personal" view of each candidate to help guide their voting decisions. This direct line of communication removes the need for political parties or social groups as aids in decision-making.

However, TV's focus on individuals means that personality is more important than substance for political candidates. It also means that the media cover the president more than they cover Congress or the Supreme Court.

With the amount of information available to citizens today, you'd think that political competence would be greatly increased. That is, citizens in the American democracy should be better equipped to make rational policy decisions. Yet this clearly isn't the case.

The media respond to criticism of the superficiality of their coverage by pointing out that they provide what the public wants. Their motive is profit, which means appealing to the largest possible audience. They say that if the public demanded serious, in-depth news programs, they would certainly provide such programs. It's the public's appetite for entertainment over substance, they say, that keeps the coverage limited and superficial.