



The U.S. **media**, independent outlets that convey news about politics, have undergone dramatic changes in the past quarter century. As recently as the mid-1990s, most adults watched one of the three network nightly newscasts, whereas today the media environment is so fragmented that the predominant unifying feature of Americans' media habits is that they pay attention to local TV news.¹ In this fragmented environment, media organizations have struggled to turn a profit. In 1984, daily newspapers sold 63 million copies nationwide, but today their circulation is less than half that.² Some organizations have adjusted by selling digital content or converting to a non-profit model, but many have gone out of business.

The very fact that in most cases the media are businesses has shaped their content over time. Although aspiring journalists are taught to adhere to strict rules of professional procedure and ethics while prioritizing uncovering the truth of what the public needs to know,³ media content is inevitably also shaped by what the public finds useful or entertaining – and is willing to pay for.⁴

The independent media has a long history in the U.S., with the Supreme Court recognizing many protections against government interference in publishing, based on the First Amendment's guarantee of **freedom of the press**. News outlets may report on public figures without reprisal unless they do so with reckless disregard for the truth. They may even publish classified

material over official objections.⁵ Neither the Constitution nor federal law, however, immunizes reporters from testifying in court about potential illegal activity carried out by sources.⁶

Political scientists have found that media messages seldom have major persuasive effects.⁷ But politicians have long recognized that media outlets are crucial in transmitting messages to the public about politics and policy. President Franklin Roosevelt's "fireside chats" on the radio serve as one benchmark; the televised 1960 Kennedy-Nixon debates were another; and President Donald Trump's use of Twitter serves as yet another milestone. Congress has televised its proceedings via CSPAN since the 1980s, and most Congressional and executive offices have at least one staffer devoted to media relations.

As the number of television, internet, and other options has boomed in the last two decades, Americans have had more opportunities to choose to consume only political content that accords with their prior beliefs – or to ignore political content altogether. Scholars disagree on how much, and among which groups of Americans, this **selective exposure** is most likely to occur. Even the most influential political news outlets have audiences that represent only a tiny fraction of Americans: *The New York Times* has a total of 4.3 million digital and print subscribers; the FOX News average primetime viewership amounts to 2.4 million.⁸

¹ Pew Research Center, "The State of the News Media 2019," <https://www.journalism.org/fact-sheet/local-tv-news/>.

² <https://www.journalism.org/fact-sheet/newspapers/>.

³ See, for example, <https://journalism.columbia.edu/about>.

⁴ James T. Hamilton, *All the News That's Fit to Sell: How the Market Transforms Information into News* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

⁵ *New York Times v. Sullivan* 376 U.S. 254 (1964) and *New York Times v. United States* 403 U.S. 713 (1971).

⁶ Many states do have such "shield laws." See Jonathan Peters, "Shield Laws and Journalists' Privilege: The Basics Every Reporter Should Know," *Columbia Journalism Review*, August 22, 2016.

⁷ They may set the agenda or affect the way in which the public views certain issues, however. Dietram A. Scheufele

and David Tewksbury, "Framing, Agenda Setting, and Priming: The Evolution of Three Media Effects Models," *Journal of Communication* 57 (2007), pp. 9-20.

⁸ Mark Joyella, "CNN Drops 26% in Primetime as FOX News Dominates April Cable Ratings," *Forbes*, April 30, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/markjoyella/2019/04/30/cnn-drops-26-percent-in-prime-time-as-fox-news-dominates-april-cable-ratings/>, and "New York Times Subscriber Numbers Are Skyrocketing in the Trump Age," *MarketWatch*, February 6, 2019, <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/new-york-times-subscriber-numbers-are-skyrocketing-in-the-trump-age-2019-02-06>.