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## **Persuasion and Resistance: The American Public and the Mass Media**

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Northern Illinois University

**Persuasion and Resistance: The American Public and the Mass Media**

A Thesis Submitted to the  
University Honors Program  
In Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements of the Baccalaureate Degree  
With Upper Division Honors  
Department of Political Science

By

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DeKalb, Illinois

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ABSTRACT:

This study tests the hypothesis that people who have stronger media literacy skills and who better understand social media, framing, agenda setting, and entertainment/soft news – will be better able to make informed political decisions. The author researched social media, framing, agenda setting, and entertainment/soft news in an effort to better understand how the media influences the American people and American government and what the effects of those influences might be. As technology continues to advance, the way American people interact with politics and the government changes. Because of these continual changes, it retains significance to research media literacy and its effects on Americans' interactions with politics and government. The authors' research concluded that media literacy does indeed affect the ability of

an audience to not accept media content as absolute truth, but rather to make their own informed political decisions.

## Literature Review

According to Cook and Knight, social media are “all forms of new media production whose primary function is interaction – not simply presentation of information. Any news product or piece of information that is presented in order to be commented on, discussed, circulated, and used within a network of social interaction, is for us, ‘social’ media” (2013, 4). Cook and Knight go on to say that media outlets use social media to give people nearly instantaneous coverage of events and that media outlets essentially act as gatekeepers – as they curate and publicize information that has already been made public via social media (2013, 4).

Others focus on how social media is used by government officials. In *The Personalization of Politics*, W. Lance Bennett says personalized politics exists today as “emotional bonds with charismatic leaders” can be developed and nurtured over social media (2012). Bennett goes on to say, “the pervasive use of social technology enables individuals to become important catalysts of collective action processes as they activate their own social networks” (2012, 22).

Slothuus and de Vreese define issue framing as “a process in which a communicator ‘defines and constructs a political issue or public controversy’ by emphasizing ‘a subset of potentially relevant considerations’ and thereby pointing the receiver to ‘the essence of the issue’” (2010, 631). Others say framing is, “the media’s power to influence how people comprehend issues by using interpretive frames to cover the issue” (Shanahan, McBeth, Hathaway, and Arnell, 2008:120). Shanahan, McBeth, Hathaway, and Arnell suggest there are two different avenues that media outlets might take to frame a news story: linguistics and framing format ( 2008, 120).

In the article *Framing Responsibility for Political Issues*, Shanto Iyengar says that television news can obscure the connections between “political problems and the actions or inactions of political leaders” (1996, 59). Iyengar also says that what television news really does is simply protect elected officials from policy failures or controversies by providing coverage that makes lawmakers and other elected officials seem more legitimate.

Agenda setting is “the notion that issues that are afforded a great deal of media coverage are the ones people view as the most important” (Miller, 2007:689). Dreier argues that media can’t necessarily control what the American public thinks, but they can control what the American public thinks about (2010, 763).

Extensive research about the topic has shown that “agenda setting effects have been captured for all forms of mass media coverage...research has shown that individuals habitually refer to issues or events ‘in the news’ when diagnosing current social and political ills” (1993, 368). Miller suggests that the media can control what people think about by “focusing an individual’s attention on some problems or political topics and by ignoring others” (2007, 689).

In “Soft News and the Accidentally Attentive Public,” the author writes, “The last two decades have witnessed a dramatic expansion in the number and diversity of entertainment-oriented, quasi-news media outlets” (2003, 18). The author refers to these outlets as “soft news.” In regard to television, van Zoonen says, “It provides narratives and perspectives to express and make sense of politics that may replace or transform the existing ones evoked through more traditional channels of political communication” (2005).

Grice and Macintyre say, “I think the Government is actually in the business of promoting indifference to politics. It is systematically trying to diminish the substance of debate and conduct politics as soap opera and photo-calls” (1999). In regard to politics as soap opera,

van Zoonen says, “conflicts in soaps are never simply irrational feuds that are only based on likes and dislikes. They have good reasons, just as the political conflicts must have a substantial logic...” (2005, 27).

#### Conclusions – Future Study:

I have gathered various articles about social media, framing, agenda setting, and entertainment/soft news in an effort to understand how the media influences the American people and how they respond to government. These articles are well put together and will be critical to my discussion of my research topic. Though these articles will be helpful, they do not link all four aspects of the study together. This leaves adequate room for me to develop a strong research paper using their work as a body of sources by which I can base my paper.

## Persuasion and Resistance: The American Public and the Mass Media

It is well known that the political news habits of Millennials (1981-2000) are different from those of Generation X (1965-1980) and Baby Boomers (1946-1964). According to the PEW Research Center, Millennials rely on Facebook for their news far more than any other source and they're exposed to more political content on social media sites than are Gen Xers or Boomers (Gottfried and Barthel, 2015). When asked about certain news sources in a survey, Millennials were far less familiar with the sources than the previous two generations. They were less aware of 18 out of 36 news sources. They were more aware of only two news sources: BuzzFeed and Google News. However, Millennials are no less trusting than Gen Xers and Baby Boomers of news sources they know. On average, the three generations trust about four-in-ten sources they have heard of and distrust about two-in-ten (Gottfried and Barthel, 2015).

This shows us that, although the relationship between mass media and the American public differs from past generations regarding how generations get their news, the amount of sources the public trusts and distrusts hasn't really changed. Perhaps that is because, like the generations before them, Millennials understand the importance of media literacy. Perhaps they understand the persuasive capabilities of the mass media and this lack of trust in the media is an act of rebellion, or resistance, to the work of the digital age they've been forced to embrace. It is important that one looks at the mass media with a critical eye. This study aims to determine how the relationship between the American government and the mass media impacts the American public. The hypothesis will test if people who have stronger media literacy skills and who better understand social media, framing, agenda setting, and entertainment/soft news – will be better able to resist the influence of the media and make informed political decisions. Understanding these facets of media allow one to “discriminate and evaluate content, to critically dissect media



forms, to investigate media effects and uses, to use media intelligently, and to construct alternative media,” or in other words, become more media literate (Kellner and Share, 2007:4).

In order to test this hypothesis, it is crucial to have an understanding of what media literacy is. According to the Media Literacy National Leadership Conference, a media literate person “can decode, evaluate, analyze, and produce both print and electronic media” (Aufderheide, 2001: 79). Media literacy involves “awareness of media, analysis of content, activism, advocacy, and access to media” (Cramer, 2015:14). A media literate person understands that media is neither meant to, nor able to, directly influence an audience. The American public is not a passive audience, but rather, an active audience.

One example of how the American public is an active audience regards how people watch television. If the American public were a passive audience, people would turn on a television without regards to programming. Paul Klein said, “The biggest star in America is not any actor or show. It’s television. People watch television, they don’t watch programs” (Klein, 1971). But more recent research shows that people usually tune in with a specific program in mind, rather than just turning on the television and watching whatever they come across first. Many people are specifically choosing certain programs over others, because they want to participate in watching a program they find interesting (Adams 2000). By choosing not to watch specific programs, people are able to maintain control over which programs they will or will not allow to indirectly influence them. Because the American public is an active audience, people are able to achieve a sense of media literacy.

But media literacy is complex and there are different degrees of media literacy. It is important that the American people understand how the media and lawmakers and government officials use their platform to influence the public. This will ensure that the public can harness

this influence and maintain control over what they will and what they will not be influenced by. This will help the American public to maintain and perfect the active audience habits they are practicing. This paper argues that people who have a better understanding of social media, framing, agenda setting, and entertainment/soft news – are more media literate and will be better able to make informed political decisions.

In his article “The Media, Media Literacy and Democratic Education,” Paul R. Carr quotes a man named Jack, a teacher-participant in his research. Jack says,

“People with high levels of media literacy will have a better understanding of the world, adopt a position, make their own conclusions, discern truth from fiction, not follow trends, and can have a better opinion and judgment on critical issues. On the other hand people with low levels of media literacy will be vulnerable, affected, impressed, and will have conflicts when digesting the information they receive” (Carr, 2011:209).

Carr argues that, “studying media literacy is another entry into how democracy works” (Carr, 2011:210). He also says that the media are not neutral and that they are able to frame the world or specific topics a certain way while still giving the “illusion of competition and diversity of opinion” (Carr, 2011). This can “constrain debate and political literacy” as media work to persuade the American public (Carr, 2011). But resistance to this reality can be achieved through the development of media literacy. This resistance can ensure that one will be better able to make informed political decisions, as they are acting as an active audience instead of a passive audience (Carr, 2011). Media literacy affects “the degree to which people are engaged and are able to contest hegemonic representations of what is considered to be in the collective interest of society, including wars, policies to deal with the environment, racism, and poverty, and the framing of the role of education in society” (Carr, 2011). As one can see, media literacy affects

the ability of an audience to not accept media content as absolute truth, but rather to make their own informed political decisions.

It's been established that people who have stronger media literacy skills will be better able to resist the influence of the media and make their own informed political decisions. One can further develop media literacy by developing an understanding of social media, framing, agenda setting, and entertainment/soft news. Social media are "all forms of new media production whose primary function is interaction – not simply presentation of information. Any news product or piece of information that is presented in order to be commented on, discussed, circulated, and used within a network of social interaction, is for us, 'social' media" (Cook and Knight, 2013: 4).

Social media influences how political officials approach their jobs and also how citizens respond to government. People who better understand how this avenue for communication works, will be better able to make informed political decisions. Millennials have been growing up with the concept of social media and are very much the catalyst for the social media movement. However, Generation X and Baby Boomers spent the majority of their lives without social media. Achieving media literacy in regard to social media might be more of a challenge for older generations.

The traditional idea of the concept of journalism has shifted. Therefore, so have the skills and techniques needed to take part in it. Media outlets use social media to post news stories, develop story ideas, and get feedback from their audience. More specifically, news anchors and reporters are expected to engage with their audience on social media via posts and comments. As stated earlier in this paper, media uses agenda setting and framing to influence the public. Just as they use entertainment/soft news as an avenue to do these things, they use social media as well.

It is important for one to understand the idea of media outlets as gatewatchers on social media (Cook and Knight, 2013).

One example involves a journalist who is often acknowledged for the way he used social media as a source. Andy Carvin sources his stories from a diverse set of contacts on digital platforms. Carvin is a strategist for National Public Radio (NPR) and acted as a gatewatcher during the Egyptian Revolution and Arab Spring. He used social media to network with people that were experiencing the Egyptian Revolution and Arab Spring first hand, verified their information through his trusted sources, and then simply relayed the information to the public. This allowed Carvin to give the public nearly instantaneous coverage of the uprisings, without actually being a direct witness (Cook and Knight, 2013: 4).

Through Carvin's example, we can see that because of social media, journalists are no longer just gatekeepers who decide what information gets published and what does not get published, but rather, they act as gatewatchers. They curate and publicize information that has already been made public via social media (Cook and Knight, 2013: 4). Understanding how media outlets use social media to influence their audience is important, but it is also important to understand how lawmakers and government officials use social media to influence people.

In *The Personalization of Politics*, W. Lance Bennett says, "Personalized politics has long existed, of course, in the form of populist uprisings or emotional bonds with charismatic leaders" (Bennett, 2012). Personalized politics still exists today, but today, those "emotional bonds with charismatic leaders" can be developed and nurtured over social media as well. From this, we can conclude that the American public is affected by personalized appeals on social media (Bennett, 2012). Media outlets and lawmakers and government officials can best influence the American public by appealing to their personal lifestyle values.

In *Entertaining the Citizen*, the author argues that a politician is judged by what kind of person they are. She suggests that there are three “stages” on which politicians must perform. These stages are “political institutions and processes,” “private life,” and the “stage of the public and the popular.” Most might say that a politician’s main goal should be to get people to vote for them because of their policies – because of how they act on their “political institutions and processes stage” and their “public and the popular” stage. But some people might want to know more. Some might want to know who the politician is on the private stage (van Zoonen, 2005).

Social media allows government officials and lawmakers to switch back and forth easily from the public stage to the private stage. It gives them another avenue to share about themselves whereas in the past, what people would know about a government official and lawmaker could be limited to just what they do in their public life. Social media allows people to publicize their private life (van Zoonen, 2005). Social media can especially assist candidates who are not so well known. These candidates are able to circumvent the barriers that come about when using traditional media. They are no longer confined to the old campaign style. Social media can mobilize their message and allow them to represent themselves in an unfiltered way. Candidates who are not as well known may also use social media as a means to encourage financial contributions to campaigns (Zamora-Medina).

To achieve media literacy, it is important to understand that government officials and lawmakers could be using social media to appeal to your personal lifestyle values – regardless of if how they frame themselves is who they truly are or not (van Zoonen, 2005).

Just as an understanding of social media is important in achieving media literacy, framing is important as well. An understanding of framing can help one to better gauge public opinion and develop a better sense of media literacy. This idea of ‘issue’ framing involves how media

outlets and government officials and lawmakers shape a news story (Slothuus and Vreese, 2010). Slothuus and de Vreese define issue framing as “a process in which a communicator ‘defines and constructs a political issue or public controversy’ by emphasizing ‘a subset of potentially relevant considerations’ and thereby pointing the receiver to ‘the essence of the issue’” (2010, 631). In other words, framing is, “the media’s power to influence how people comprehend issues by using interpretive frames to cover the issue” (Shanahan, McBeth, Hathaway, and Arnell, 2008:120).

There are two different avenues that media outlets might take to frame a news story. The first involves linguistics. Journalists will use different source cues and adjectives to frame issues. The second avenue involves framing format. Media outlets control who or what they use as a source and how they characterize the issues they are covering. In a study done by Shanahan, McBeth, Hathaway, and Arnell, they use an example involving media’s use of local sources. They argue, “A policy issue can remain localized through exclusive media use of local sources,” and that “Conversely, an issue is expanded as the media cites national source cues” (2008, 120).

In the article *Framing Responsibility for Political Issues*, Shanto Iyengar says that television news can obscure the connections between “political problems and the actions or inactions of political leaders” (1996, 59). He says that this “weakens the accountability of elected officials” (1996, 59). Iyengar even goes so far as to say that what television news really does is simply protect elected officials from policy failures or controversies by providing coverage that makes lawmakers and other elected officials seem more legitimate.

The news media might have the power to frame a news story a certain way, but lawmakers and other government officials can influence media to frame a story a certain way as well. Public opinion is not just an “aggregate characteristic of the mass public” (Jacoby

2000:763). Public opinion stems from the interaction between the public and the political elites. Often times, the political elites are the ones who are providing the “specific characterization of an issue” to which the American public responds (Jacoby, 2000:763). This might involve framing a story a certain way in an effort to garner popular support. Political parties do this. For example, in William G. Jacoby’s article, *Framing and Public Opinion on Government Spending*, he says,

“Republican and Democrats tend to frame the government-spending issue differently. Republican spokespersons argue for decreased spending in very general terms because this is the presentation of the issue that results in lower levels of support for spending among the mass public. In contrast, Democratic elites use very specific programs and target constituencies in their political rhetoric – the issue frame that clearly increases popular endorsement of government spending” (2000:763).

Some might argue that lawmakers and elected officials use this political reality to their advantage. Some might say that they are trying to manipulate the thoughts of the American public. But perhaps lawmakers and other elected officials are simply doing what any reasonable person might do – they give their audience the information that supports their opinion about a topic. But whatever their motives, lawmakers and elected officials do influence how media frame a story (Jacoby, 2000).

Just like social media and framing, agenda setting also influences how political officials approach their jobs and also how citizens respond to government. Agenda setting is “the notion that issues that are afforded a great deal of media coverage are the ones people view as the most important” (Miller, 2007:689). Media outlets have some control in what their audience thinks about. They can’t necessarily control what the American public thinks, but they can control what

the American public thinks about (Dreier, 2010:763). The media can do this by “focusing an individual’s attention on some problems or political topics and by ignoring others” (Miller, 2007:689). Agenda setting most certainly exists. Extensive research about the topic has shown that “agenda setting effects have been captured for all forms of mass media coverage...research has shown that individuals habitually refer to issues or events ‘in the news’ when diagnosing current social and political ills” (1993, 368).

Lawmakers and government officials use mass media to get their agenda across. One example of this involves ACORN and the 2008 presidential election. ACORN is an acronym for Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now. Before 2008, it was the nation’s largest community organizing group, but it wasn’t very well known. John McCain and Sarah Palin called much attention to ACORN during the presidential campaign, when they suggested that ACORN was involved in widespread voter fraud. They also tried to associate President Obama with ACORN to discredit him. Because McCain, Palin, and their cronies used the media to get their agenda across, this campaign against ACORN was successful (Dreier, 2010:761).

By November 2009, a survey found that over a quarter of the American public believed that “ACORN had stolen the election for Obama” (Dreier, 2010:761). ACORN, a community organization that few people actually knew about, was suddenly the subject of a major news story and became well known by the American public. In his study, Dreier coins the term “opinion entrepreneurs” (2010, 763). He defines the term as “similar to Entman’s notion of elites (politicians, ex-officials, and experts) who influence the mainstream news media” (Dreier, 2010:763). He says that these elites work together and echo the same message. He suggests “the whole echo chamber is larger in influence than the sum of its parts” (Dreier, 2010:763).



The Republican Party has the mass media at their fingertips. In dealing with ACORN, they were able to release an army of opinion entrepreneurs into the digital world to echo each other's rumors about ACORN so diligently, that many people believed what they had to say simply because they had heard it from so many different sources. Dreier says Andrew Breitbart used his website, biggovernment.com to communicate the Republican Party's case against ACORN. He had 200 bloggers write multiple posts about ACORN as they tried to get their agenda across. Fox News also ran several segments about ACORN on the day the story broke (Dreier, 2010).

In contrast, ACORN didn't even have a full-time media staff person to elicit media attention to their side of the story. The Republican Party had the media attention, and the momentum. This contrasts the example of power that is shown by John McCain and Sarah Palin. In order for their rumor to gain momentum, they simply had to garner media attention. And with Andrew Breitbart and Fox News on their side, they were easily able to tell the American public what to think about. Republicans had heard about the ACORN issue more than others. Over 60 percent of Republicans had heard "a lot" about ACORN, while only 46 percent of Democrats and 43 percent of independents had heard "a lot" about ACORN (Dreier, 2010).

The final topic that influences how political officials approach their jobs and also how citizens respond to government is entertainment/soft news. In "Soft News and the Accidentally Attentive Public," the author writes, "The last two decades have witnessed a dramatic expansion in the number and diversity of entertainment-oriented, quasi-news media outlets" (2003, 18). The author refers to these outlets as "soft news." For the purposes of this paper, I will do the same.

The mass media uses soft news to influence the American public. One of the more common ways they do this is through television. Television is our prime source for learning

about politics. “It provides narratives and perspectives to express and make sense of politics that may replace or transform the existing ones evoked through more traditional channels of political communication” (van Zoonen, 2005). Politics is seen as a sort of television drama. The more dramatic soft news media outlets make issues seem, the more people will probably tune in to their show. In regard to the reality show, *Big Brother*, someone suggested that the show was so popular in Britain one summer because the Labour Cabinet was on holiday. They suggested that since people weren’t able to watch the Labour Cabinet, they watched Big Brother instead. This shows how much the British public employed politics as entertainment (van Zoonen, 2005).

Just as the mass media is using soft news to influence the American public, we can be sure that lawmakers and government officials are using soft news to influence them as well. William Hague, from Great Britain’s Conservative Party, said, “I think the Government is actually in the business of promoting indifference to politics. It is systematically trying to diminish the substance of debate and conduct politics as soap opera and photo-calls” (Grice and Macintyre, 1999). While this idea involves the British government, we can relate it to American politics as well.

It is a tactic we see frequently in television and amongst politicians. Lawmakers, government officials, and political pundits will “evoke the soap metaphor to frame political conflicts” a certain way (van Zoonen, 2005). They will try to frame other “politicians’ behavior as completely beyond any kind of ordinary reality or moral standards” that the American public might share with these politicians (van Zoonen, 2005). They try to frame the politician in a way that makes people feel they have nothing in common with him or her. Knowing this, it is important for people to remember that many times, true political conflicts can get buried in the metaphor that is politics as soap opera. As van Zoonen says, “conflicts in soaps are never simply

irrational feuds that are only based on likes and dislikes. They have good reasons, just as the political conflicts must have a substantial logic...” (2005, 27).

People who have stronger media literacy skills and who better understand social media, framing, agenda setting, and entertainment/soft news – will be better able to make informed political decisions. This paper shows us how the mass media and lawmakers and other government officials use social media, framing, agenda setting, and entertainment/soft news to influence the American public. Modern media is a constantly shifting industry, but knowledge of this information is a solid foundation on which to examine media in the years to come.

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