Media Institution: Crash Course Government and Politics #44

Crash Course: U.S. Government and Politics
https://youtube.com/watch?v=6F0g4N415uw
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/6F0g4N415uw

Hello. I'm Craig, and this is Crash Course Government and Politics, and today, we're going to talk about one of my favorite subjects: the media and its role in politics.

(Clone with tie)
At last, we're finally going to hear a fair and balanced account of how the lamestream media is distorting the American public's understanding of current affairs!

(Clone without tie)
Yeah, sure, except for the segment of the American public that gets all of their information from right wing media sources.

(Criag)
Ok, so the media can be a thorny issue, but, we are talking about politics here, and technically we are a part of the media, so we should probably say something about it...Other than how awesome we are at it.

[THEME]

(deep, growly voice)
I am the media! Ha ha ha ha ha!

(regular voice)
So, in terms of politics, the main function of the media is to provide information so people can make decisions and get involved in politics.

(deep voice)
Ha ha ha ha!

(regular voice)
Sorry. For the economically inclined, the media lowers information costs. Rather than going out and researching what we might want to know, which takes time and effort, various media outlets tell us stuff that they think we will find useful.

We probably have a sense of what we mean by media, but it's a good idea to break it down into types, because each of the forms of media work slightly differently, and the role of the different types has changed a lot over the years. There's a lot more beards, for instance.

The oldest form of media, at least, that we are going to talk about today, is print, which means newspapers and magazines. Print is no longer the main source of information for Americans, but it sure used to be. Especially in the days when some large cities had papers that would put out a morning and afternoon edition.

But just because fewer people are reading print media doesn't mean that they aren't very important. For one thing, most of the other news media organizations rely on print for their news. Newspapers like the New York Times and the Washington Post still break most major news stories and provide a lot of information for television and Internet news.

Print media also tend to offer more detail and comprehensive news stories, although this is changing quickly. One aspect of print media that is often overlooked is that it's still the main source of news for educated elites, and these are the people whose opinions tend to matter a lot in making policy.

If you're skeptical about this, watch a morning news program or check out an article on a news aggregator website and see how often the program article references the Times or the Post. You might be surprised.

The second oldest, and in some ways still most important source of political information comes from broadcast media. As a YouTuber, I hate to say this, but television still reaches more Americans than any other form of media, and remains an important source of political information.

Radio is less important at reaching a diverse mass audience, although talk radio, especially conservative talk radio, matters a lot in the political media landscape. But despite it's massive reach, broadcast media has a significant drawback in shaping public opinion: television stories are very short, usually less than two minutes long, and therefore less informative.

A third major media force in politics is, what's that called? The Internet! You probably already know that, though, since you're watching this video. It's a little bit tricky to write about how the Internet affects politics because it's changing so rapidly. But there are a few things we can say.

As a news source, the primary advantage of the Internet is that it can update so quickly. This is great for breaking news, although there's an argument that it pushes news organizations towards creating more stories and hot takes (also my nickname in high school), rather than deep reporting.

In the early days of the web, Internet news was mostly just online versions of print newspapers, but that landscape has shifted, a lot. First came blogs about politics, and then sites dedicated to politics. Which, this being America, tended to polarize into right wing and left wing sites.

The growth of social media provided new avenues for politicians, campaigns, and parties to get their information to the masses, and now every candidate has at least one Twitter profile and Facebook page. And they've probably got a Snapchat and a Tumblr, and a, uh, maybe a Tinder, and staff dedicated to maintaining a social media presence.

This can be great for lots of information about a candidate or their policies, but it's hardly unbiased news, so if this is your only source of information, you're probably aren't going to get the full story.

For a sense of how the media landscape has changed over the past two decades, check out this chart. That's right, we got charts here. Cause we are video media. The surprising thing to me about this data is not that so many more people are getting their news from online sources, but that such a high percentage still relies on television news, especially if you combine local, national, and cable news programs.

I, sometimes I forget I have a TV. I guess you can chalk it up to information costs. Without any research on your part, watching a nightly news program will keep you decently informed, and it only takes twenty-two minutes of your time, without the commercials. So just sit there and let the TV do the thinking for ya.

I should probably talk about those commercials a little bit. One of the really great things about the Internet is that it opens up the possibility of a lot more non-commercially supported information becoming available. There's no commercials on the Internet... none.

A serious complaint about broadcast and print journalism is that, because they are primarily financed by advertising, news organizations have an incentive not to report on stories that are critical of their parent organizations of advertisers. This doesn't stop us from getting negative reports about News Corp or the Washington Post group, but they're unlikely to report on themselves.

So this question of how much we can trust the news comes down

largely to issues of bias, because it's pretty rare that news organizations lie outright. Without the public trust, readers and viewers will just go somewhere else. This doesn't mean that newspapers, and to a much lesser extent, television companies, are without bias, though.

The New York Times and Washington Post do tend to be more liberal than conservative, but overall their probably balanced out by the Wall Street Journal, Fox News, and talk radio, which tend to be conservative.

Putting political bias aside, the most persistent bias in the news seems to be towards conflict and scandal! (Punches eagle) And these are not really liberal or conservative issues. If anything, the news media is most biased towards conflict, which may explain why you don't see a lot of stories about compromise. Two politicians smiled and shook hands today, and then walked away, happy. That doesn't sound interesting.

Let's look at the three main factors that effect news coverage in the Thought Bubble. The first factor influencing the news is the journalists who make it. The journalists are even more important than their bosses, the publishers, because they have the discretion to report and interpret the news. If you think the news is just the facts, then it's useful to remember that the New York Times slogan used to be: all the news that's fit to print. Do reporters have a bias towards one political ideology or the other? Probably. More journalists identify as liberal and as Democrats than say they are conservative or Republican.

The next factor to consider is the source of political news: the politicians themselves. Politicians do a lot of things to create a positive media image for themselves, and this goes beyond shaking hands and kissing babies. They show up at important events, like opening day of the baseball season, or a natural disaster, and make the most of these photo opportunities.

They also cultivate relationships with reporters, because if a journalist likes you, they might be more likely to write something nice about you. Or at least something less mean. One of the best ways to cultivate a good relationship with a journalist is by leaking information to them. A leak is a disclosure of confidential information to a journalist, and politicians can use them to cement relationships with news organizations, and to make sure that a story is reported the way that they want it reported.

Reporters have a hard time refusing a scoop, so if a politician gives inside information , they can usually influence the way the reporter will tell the story. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

Even more important then leaks are press releases. These are stories written by politicians, or more likely their staff, that are released to the press. Politicians hope that stories will be reported with minimal revisions, and they often are, especially since there's so much pressure for news organizations to put out content as quickly as possible.

News organizations like them a lot, because they lower the cost of producing information. But advocates of responsible journalism worry a lot about them because, coming directly from politicians, they're certain to be biased. And when they're reported as straight news, they can be misleading.

The third factor influencing the media is *us*, the consumers of news. Why do we matter if news is just a matter of reporting what happens? We matter because producers of news want us to read and watch it, so they make news that we will want to read and watch. In practice, this means that the news will be tailored to the groups of people most likely to consume it.

And those people are not always a good cross-section of Americans as a whole. People who watch and read the news tend to be better educated and wealthier than those who don't, and media producers respond to this. What this means in practice is that certain segments of the population, and their concerns, are under-reported. Among the large groups that don't get media attention that is proportional to their size are the working class, especially union workers, religious groups, veterans, and various minority groups.

So the media plays an important role in American politics as the filter through which politicians can make information available to the public. The media, as the name suggests, mediates this information and shapes it in powerful ways. In the sense that it doesn't actually create or change the structures of government, you could argue that the media isn't all that important to the American political system. But if you believe that information is key to understanding why and how American politicians act, then we start to see media in a new light.

In many ways the most important thing about media is what it doesn't cover. It's really hard for voters and other citizens to formulate opinions and try to influence their elected representatives if they don't even know something is an issue. Even in the twenty-first century, when there are so many more sources of information to choose from, there are still stories we don't get to hear.

The first step to hearing them is probably a better understanding of the media and its importance as a political institution. Thanks for watching, see you next time.

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Crash Course is made with the help of all of these unbiased journalists. Thank you. Except for that guy. He's pretty biased. That one's not even a journalist. I don't even know who that is.