The press has played a major role in American politics from the founding of the republic. Once subordinate to politicians and the major parties, it has become increasingly independent, compelling politicians and elected officials to develop new strategies to ensure favorable publicity and public support.

Newspapers in the colonial era were few in number and very different from what they would later become. Operated by individual entrepreneurs who produced a variety of printed materials, newspapers included little political news. Instead, their few columns were devoted to foreign news and innocuous correspondence that would not offend colonial officials or the wealthy patrons on whom printers relied for much of their business.

This began to change during the Revolutionary era, when printers were drawn into the escalating conflict with Great Britain. Adversely affected by the Stamp Act, many printers opened their columns to opponents of British rule and eventually became champions of American independence. Others sided with the British and often found themselves the objects of popular wrath. After the war most printers returned to publishing uncontroversial items, but an important precedent had been set. Politicians and elected officials recognized that they could use the press to win support for favored
causes, and ordinary Americans now saw newspapers as a medium through which they might gain knowledge about public affairs and become active citizens. Believing that a free press could spur public enlightenment and political engagement, Congress passed laws that reduced periodical postal rates and encouraged publishers to share and reprint their correspondence.

By the early 1790s, then, most Americans considered newspapers vital to the health of the republic, providing a medium through which politicians and the public could communicate, learn about issues, and develop policies that were shaped by rational, informed debate.

Almost immediately, however, the appearance of a very different kind of journalism confounded this expectation. Sparked by divergent plans for the future of the new republic, competing factions emerged within George Washington’s administration and Congress, and by the mid-1790s each faction had established partisan newspapers championing its point of view. These publications were subsidized through patronage, and, though they had a limited circulation, the material they published was widely reprinted and discussed, and contributed to the establishment of the nation’s first political parties, the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans.

Newspapers like Philip Freneau’s *National Gazette*, the most prominent Democratic-Republican organ, crafted distinctly partisan lenses through which readers were encouraged to view the world. Specializing in gossip, innuendo, and ad hominem attacks, these newspapers sought to make readers fearful about the intentions of their opponents. The strategy was quite effective at arousing support and mobilizing voters to go the polls—after all, the fate of the republic appeared to be at stake. But it hardly made the press a fount of public enlightenment, to the dismay of many an observer.

The rabid and unexpected partisanship of the 1790s culminated in the passage by the Federalist-dominated Congress of the Sedition Act (1798), which was designed to throttle the most intemperate journalistic supporters of the Democratic-Republicans by criminalizing “false, scandalous, and malicious writing” that defamed government officials. Though resulting in relatively few prosecutions, the law sparked an uproar that benefited Thomas Jefferson and his allies and created a groundswell of support for the principle of freedom of the press. In the wake of Jefferson’s election to the White House, the act’s sponsors were unable to extend its life and it expired in March 1801.

The partisan press expanded in the early 1800s and reached the peak of its influence during the age of Jackson. Publishers, eager for government printing contracts, allied themselves with leading politicians and devoted their columns to publicizing their candidacies and policy aims. Newspaper publishers were particularly important in promoting Andrew Jackson, serving in his kitchen cabinet, and enabling him to develop a national following. Jackson’s rise to power prompted a dramatic polarization of newspapers, a divide that was essential to the emergence of the Democrats and the Whigs, truly national parties that were organized down to the grass roots.

Political parties were not the only organizations to establish newspapers. Religious denominations and reform societies also founded newspapers and journals of opinion and advocacy to attract support and influence public opinion. Evangelical groups were especially enterprising in their use of newspapers and other printed tracts to win converts and promote piety, and in the 1820s and 1830s these efforts often spilled over into broader campaigns to improve public morality. By constructing a network of affiliated publications that extended through much of North and by developing narrative themes that were at once sensational and didactic, the religious and reform newspapers of the early 1800s were important pioneers of modern journalism and popular culture.

The most controversial reform organs were abolitionist newspapers like William Lloyd Garrison’s *The Liberator*, which was launched in 1831 and inspired many similar publications. Making use of the communications infrastructure developed by the religious press, abolitionist newspapers spread throughout the North and were sent en masse to cities and towns in the South in hopes of kindling opposition to slavery in the region. To suppress their dissemination, pro-slavery activists broke into post offices and seized and burned any copies they found. While this tactic was effective at minimizing the spread of antislavery sentiment, it angered and alarmed many Northerners, bolstering abolitionist claims that the republic was imperiled by the tyrannical designs of the “Slave Power.”

Despite their effectiveness in helping to build national parties and raising public awareness of social and political issues, the partisan press and reform press were widely criticized, and their limitations paved the way for a new kind of publication, a commercial mass-circulation press that first appeared in the 1830s. Inexpensive, widely accessible, and written in a colorful style designed to entertain as well as inform, newspapers like the *New York Sun* sparked a revolution in journalism as publishers, impressed by the commercial potential of an unabashedly popular journalism, rushed to establish similar publications. By opening their papers to advertising, publishers of the “penny press” discovered a lucrative source of revenue and freed themselves from dependence on political parties and patrons. They acquired an incentive to expand their readership to include working-class people, who had never been targeted by newspaper publishers, and to plow their profits into new technologies that allowed them to enlarge their publications and vastly increase the range of topics they covered.
press and politics

Filling their columns with material of general interest, publishers like James Gordon Bennett, founder of the New York Herald, invented the modern concept of "news." And while much of it was about politics, when Bennett and his rivals expanded coverage of other realms they diminished the prominence and centrality of political news, which became one of many different kinds of reportage. The penny press also treated political news differently, and, as it gained readers, its perspective on politics and public affairs became more influential. Most publishers recognized the strength of partisanship, and supported one party or another. Yet, because commercial imperatives encouraged publishers to reach across lines of class, ethnicity, and party, they often confined their partisanship to editorials, where it was less likely to offend.

This is not to say that the commercial mass-circulation press was objective. Editors and publishers—until after the Civil War, they were usually one and the same—had strong points of view and were not squeamish about inserting them into news reports. But their reliance on advertising allowed editors to aspire to a new role as tribunes of the public. In many instances, this meant standing by their party; in others, however, it meant criticizing it. Publishers like Bennett or Horace Greeley relished opportunities to display their independence and commitment to the public interest, a gambit inspired as much by commercial intent—the desire to attract a broad readership—as by disgust for the excesses of partisanship.

The trend toward a less partisan brand of political reporting was reinforced by the establishment of wire services like the Associated Press, which provided members with news from Washington and state capitals and eschewed partisanship out of commercial necessity. Under the influence of such services, by the 1880s, most political reporting had become standardized and largely descriptive, consisting of transcripts of speeches, legislative hearings, and official pronouncements. Most of this material was gathered by salaried wire service and newspaper correspondents, not, as in years past, by freelance correspondents who also worked for circulating press and politics

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But the commercial orientation of the mass-circulation press also pulled journalists in another direction, toward an emphasis on entertainment values. In the 1880s and 1890s, determined to attract more immigrant and working-class readers, publishers like Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst created an even more popular and entertaining brand of journalism that emphasized scandal, personalities, and a wide variety of human-interest material. Political news in their publications became increasingly sensational, as editors focused on exposés of corruption and mounted highly publicized crusades. A similar imperative affected magazine journalism, inspiring the muckraking campaigns of Cosmopolitan and McClure’s. Spurred by recognition that much of the public was sincerely concerned about social problems, the sensational press played a key role in building support for reform. By transforming politics into entertaining yet sordid morality tales, however, they also may have encouraged public cynicism and disengagement from politics.

Many middle-class and upper-class Americans were appalled by the new journalism, and, in response to its rise, Adolph Ochs transformed the New York Times into a more sober and “informational” alternative. In the early 1900s, other papers followed Ochs’s lead, creating a new divide between a popular journalism directed at lower-middle-class and working-class readers and a self-styled “respectable” press that was targeted at the educated and well-heeled. But publishers of respectable newspapers, in response to consumer demand, were soon compelled to publish features and human-interest stories as well, blurring the differences between the two kinds of journalism. Indeed, by the 1920s, the most salient distinction between the sensational press and the respectable press was the relative restraint that the former displayed when covering many of the same stories. Even in the respectable press, political news was designed to entertain as well as inform, an increasingly difficult mission now that newspapers had to compete for the public’s attention with motion pictures and other forms of popular culture.

The commercial transformation of journalism had a major impact on politicians and government officials. Not surprisingly, it forced them to present themselves in a less partisan light. Seizing the opportunities created by the spread of human-interest journalism, politicians sought to appear as “practical idealists,” party members who were nonetheless sensitive to broader concerns and willing to break with their party if necessary. To that end, politicians began to hire press secretaries and public relations advisors, usually former journalists who knew how to exploit the conventions of news gathering to gain favorable coverage for their clients. The federal government also began to employ public relations and advertising techniques, most notably in its effort to build public support for American involvement in World War I. Led by George Creel, an acclaimed journalist, the government’s campaign sparked an orgy of hyperpatriotism, demonstrating how mass-mediated propaganda could mold public opinion and potentially influence the democratic process.

Alarmed by the ease with which politicians, the government, and economic elites could use the press to get free publicity, journalists began to produce more interpretive and objective forms of news, particularly of topics like politics. This important trend
was inspired by a belief that the world was too complex to be understood by readers, and that the job of the press was to digest, analyze, and interpret events and developments so that the public could make sense of them. Newspapers hired columnists like Walter Lippmann and Dorothy Thompson to provide “expert” commentary on political events. Their columns were disseminated by syndicates to newspapers around the country, enabling them to reach a nationwide audience. Interpretive news also became a staple of the weekly newsmagazine Time. Founded in the early 1920s, it exerted a wide influence on newspaper as well as magazine journalism. The commitment of print media to interpretive news was reinforced by the spread of radio. As radio became the principal medium through which most Americans heard about late-breaking news, newspapers and magazines redoubled their emphasis on more detailed coverage.

By the 1940s, the press had become a vital institution, providing the public with information about candidates and elected officials, covering primary campaigns and nominating conventions, and offering regular reports on the vastly expanded operations of federal, state, and local government. The lens through which most of this news was filtered was the commercial, feature-oriented, largely nonpartisan perspective pioneered by the cheap popular press and further refined by more respectable organs and the major wire services. Despite persistent differences in tone among newspapers and magazines—differences attributable to their intended audiences—the political news that most Americans read was relatively standardized, a blend of interpretive reporting, analyses, commentary, and “personalized” features. Much of it was quasi-official in origin, inspired by the efforts of politicians and government officials to attract publicity or direct attention to a particular issue. More often than not, this was because the routines of news gathering encouraged close contact between journalists and official sources, an arrangement that made the news media a reliable platform for establishing points of view.

The spread of television in the 1950s did little to alter the situation. To display their commitment to the public interest, the major networks and local stations produced news and public affairs programming, covering events like the 1954 Army-McCarthy hearings and airing documentaries on issues like civil rights, the alienation of youth, and the arms race. However, it wasn’t until the expansion of the nightly network news broadcasts to 30 minutes in the early 1960s, and a similar increase in local news programming, that television became the main source of political news for most Americans. Making use of new video and satellite technologies that enabled extensive coverage of the era’s tumultuous events—from the Kennedy assassination to the Watts uprising to the debacle in Vietnam—television news broadcasts began to attract more viewers, sparking a gradual yet inexorable decline in newspaper readership. The centrality of television news became even more pronounced in the 1980s and 1990s with the rise of cable television and the popularity of news channels such as CNN.

The public’s growing reliance on television for news had significant repercussions. No less than in the print media, advertising and entertainment values came to dominate television at every level, encouraging network officials to decrease coverage of politics and make what little they offered more superficial and entertaining. Under pressure to make the news “pay,” a trend brilliantly satirized in the movie Network (1976), television journalists were forced to produce more human-interest stories and sharply limit airtime devoted to political stories that were overly complex or considered boring. With less airtime devoted to politics, politicians and elected officials gradually learned to express themselves in compact “sound bites,” a technique that placed a premium on wit and personality and further degraded public discourse. This shift was particularly evident in coverage of election campaigns. Aware of the power of television, candidates and their campaign managers in the 1960s made increasing use of modern advertising and public relations methods, a process in which candidates’ personalities were literally sold to the public. This trend was reinforced in the 1970s, when electoral reforms heightened the importance of primary elections, which the mass media, led by the major networks, transformed into highly publicized “horse races.”

Beginning in the late 1960s, the press became increasingly aggressive and adversarial. Disconcerted by recognition that government and military officials had lied about the situation in Vietnam, journalists began to seek a wider range of sources and question official reports in a spirit not seen since the early 1900s. Journalists came to see themselves as public watchdogs responsible for exposing malfeasance and providing Americans with the truth. The publication of the Pentagon Papers, a top-secret history of the Vietnam War that was leaked to the Washington Post that precipitated the Watergate scandal were perhaps the most famous manifestations of this trend. But it influenced many newspapers, magazines, television news departments, and individual journalists, inspiring them to express critical views of important institutions, including some of the large corporations for which they worked. To foster public debate, newspapers established op-ed pages and expanded their roster of columnists, making editorial pages less uniform and predictable. By the early 1980s, however, much of the mainstream press had backed away from this adversarial stance. Chastened by charges of liberal bias, journalists went out of their way to appear fair to conservatives, and in the 1990s, eager to display their balance, they zealously contributed to the right’s persecution of Bill Clinton.
The post-1960s era also witnessed a tremendous increase in alternative sources of political news, as journalists sought new platforms to produce in-depth and adversarial reportage. These alternatives included underground newspapers, political magazines specializing in advocacy journalism, politically oriented network and cable talk shows like The McLaughlin Group, Crossfire, and The Daily Show, and innumerable political Web sites and blogs. Many of these sources specialized in ideologically inspired, openly subjective reporting and commentary, creating a new field where news and opinion were hopelessly blurred. Often targeted at true believers rather than a broad audience, they vastly enlarged the parameters of political discourse and made it easier for citizens to gain access to diverse views. This was clearly an advance over the more limited, elite-driven discourse that prevailed from the 1920s through the early 1960s, particularly given the ability of government and the corporate behemoths that own the major media to exploit the conventions of journalism to project their own self-interested versions of reality.

But it is an open question whether the welter of often fiercely partisan and ideologically driven sources of political news in America serves—or will ever serve—the larger cause of public enlightenment. Can a mode of discourse that is designed at least in part to entertain, in a popular culture marketplace that is fragmented into increasingly specialized niche markets, ever contribute to inclusive, constructive debate? Or will it reach its logical conclusion and become another species of show biz?


CHARLES L. PONCE DE LEON