Politics and the Media.

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Recommended Citation

In Politics and the Media, Davis has compiled articles, opinion pieces and empirical studies representing each species of political media players. He juxtaposes studies by media and communication scholars with opinion papers and anecdotal accounts by journalists, politicians, public officials, and interest group agents. This presentational style allows Davis to structure the information in an orderly discussion of the history, present reality, and potential future of the media's role in American politics; but at the same time Davis avoids telling us what the political players think in favor of allowing them to tell their stories themselves. This book gathers the otherwise scattered thoughts and experiences of many experts in narrow aspects of the political media into a format that tells a more comprehensible, understandable story of the mass media's political influences.

Davis structures the book in an instructional format, with a brief discussion of a wide spectrum of political media topics. Each section is supplemented with suggested readings on the subject discussed. The book would be excellent as a text for courses focusing on the media’s influence on government.

The book is not limited to a discussion of campaigns and the media, although that topic is addressed. It begins with a brief discussion of media’s historical development as a player in American politics and moves into a inclusive discussion of the modern media’s relationship with each branch of government and all of the major players in American politics. Political and media institutions, individuals, and interest groups are considered in turn. The effect of media coverage on voters, candidates, policy makers, bureaucrats, and Supreme Court justices is discussed. The alleged biases of the media and the effect those biases have on coverage and content of the news is also addressed, along with the interaction of individual media and political personalities.

Davis carefully observes the symbiotic interaction between the media and political figures and institutions. Davis’ introductory analysis of many of the articles he selected mentions the constantly changing relationship as the media needs sources of hard news and as political officeholders or officeseekers need media coverage. Davis presents an excellent consideration of how presidents are, in turn, controlled and controlling of the news media, with an examination of how policy demands made on presidents accelerate as the results of their action or inaction are played out on the public’s television screen.

Davis' strength is his continuous inquiry into the role of mass media in modern politics, addressed through a series of thoughtful ques-
tions. Even more effective are their partial answers, allowing the readers to draw their own conclusions. How do journalists see their role? How do we as voters and media consumers see their role? Is the media to interpret the complex events of the day and give us a synopsis? Davis points out that scarcity of time and interest requires that media representatives do so, and in so doing the news selection process "guarantees that the news will reflect particular individual or group perspectives on reality" (34).

Would we rather the media be "neutral carriers" of the news, or do we want the press to challenge officeholders in order to elicit otherwise withheld information (93)? It seems that media consumers respond to both. We want the media to perform a multitude of functions, from watchdog to informer to entertainer.

Davis presents his inquiry into the politics and media inter-relationship in a style that is both informative and entertaining. The pieces he selects address current media issues and point to future concerns. For students of politics or communications, Politics and the Media is a great way to better understand the love-hate relationship between politics and the news.

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