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The media play a pivotal role in modern politics. Few people would disagree with that. However, people constantly debate about whether the media should play a pivotal role.

“For politicians, newspapers are today’s history,” said John Henry, political editor of the Houston Chronicle. “The reporters are the primary historians, the observ- ers and recorders of today’s events. The reporters and their newspapers are going to be around long after the politician, and it is from their work, in large part, that the politician’s role will be defined.”

High-school publications, including newspapers, yearbooks and magazines, share that goal when they train readers in the democratic process by providing localized articles about political realities. These publications fulfill an editorial responsibility to make the political record pertinent for teenage citizens.

Early coverage of politics in America consisted largely of reporting what the candidates or officeholders did. Few members of the media cared to pass judgment on the motives of the politicians.

“In 1960, the way all these papers covered elections is they would say what the candidate said every day,” said Robert Novak, political consultant for CNN. “They did not write editorial columns or editorials.”

Today, however, things are different. It’s hard to pick up a paper, listen to a radio newscast or watch the evening news without some reporter questioning the character or motivations of political figures at any level from the local school board or municipal utility district to the highest levels of the federal government.

And coverage, any coverage, is highly sought after by candidates no matter how unnatural the relationship is.

“Politicians are politicians, and reporters are reporters so the relationship is inherently unnatural,” said Melanie Fonder, a reporter with The Hill in Washington, DC. “They also thrive off the other, especially in races and at the national level.”

Marty Mack, a former candidate for the 25th Congressional District in New York, said, “You’re nobody until you’re on (television) or until you’re in the paper.”

Despite frequent coverage by local media, Mack said it wasn’t enough to get his name out. “The only media that made the difference in the end was buying our own time. Nothing’s better than your own paid media.”

Although he lost the election to incumbent Jim Walsh, Mack said he believed the coverage by the Syracuse media was largely fair. “The press has a job to do — the job as they see it. Usually, if there’s a bad story, you handed it to them.”

Walsh agreed that the coverage had basically been fair, except in Mack’s home-town of Courtland where Walsh said the
One way to avoid sound-bites, reporters suggested, is to focus on local issues. “Local papers should always, always, always cover their local congress member and perhaps statewide elections even if the national papers are also providing. The local view can usually fill in the important details.”

Novak stressed the importance of unbiased reporting but also acknowledged that editorials and columns serve a different purpose. “Who ... cares what the reporter’s opinion is,” said Novak, who became a columnist in 1963, noting that as a columnist he doesn’t have to be objective or fair any more. “The (reporters) that bother me are the ones that appear to be objective.”

Tom Patterson, a professor at Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government, also said, “The public prefers to hear from newsmakers, not journalists,” in a talk at Syracuse University. Patterson, author of Out of Order, a discussion of the media’s domination of America’s political process, said most news coverage doesn’t even deal with the issues. In fact, he said, only one percent of the paper tended to show some favoritism. But Walsh, on the day of his endorsement by the Syracuse newspapers, also said, “I don’t want to make these guys mad. They’re happy with me this week.”

Editors of high-school publications must regard fairness as a primary concern. That means giving equal space to all candidates or all sides of a voting issue. Fairness also requires careful attention to wording in every survey as well as to decisions about which visual image and what size to use. Distortions have unintended effects.

No one questions the power of the media to influence an election. Griff Singer, associate chairman of the Department of Journalism at The University of Texas at Austin, said the public simply wants honest, forthright coverage just as citizens want honest and forthright politicians. He suggested reporters work industriously to prod politicians to answer questions on topics of interest to people.

“Learn to sift out the junk from the real issues material,” Singer said. “Force politicians to answer questions and not do sound-bite stuff.”

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coverage in the 1996 primary dealt with issues. Three-fourths of news time was taken up by journalists and the other fourth was taken up by candidates and other on-air sources.

**Unbiased coverage**

But political coverage need not be biased or irresponsible. Members of Congress, according to the Freedom Forum, have advice for reporters trying to improve the quality of media coverage.

- “Stop focusing on the game and the ‘score,’ and focus on the substance.”
- “Less horse-race, more facts and figures.”
- “More fact-based reporting. Less scandals, politics and polls.”
- “Despite media pleas for details on policy, they fall back to simply covering the sights and the politics. They should trust readers more in their ability to understand policy.”
- “Stop looking exclusively for negative stories — in spite of the hype, the majority of members are decent, honest and hard-working. This needs to be covered to balance coverage.”

Henry further suggested that reporters spend time preparing for interviews with politicians.

“If you are granted an interview, prepare as if it were a final exam. Know everything current about your interviewee and the subject(s) about which you are asking,” he said. “Do not use the interview as your only source of information.”

Politicians and those working with them are not the only ones who have realized that biased political reporting is having an impact on elections and who runs for public office. Jokes such as “Want to trace your family history? Run for public office” abound. Yet political reports still turn toward personal or character issues whenever the “real” news is slow just as politicians turn to negative campaigning.

Part of this biased reporting, says Singer, comes from poor reporting.

“Don’t allow the politician to set the interview agenda. If they don’t answer directly, play the angle game too. Start from another direction to get back to the important topic.”

In *Election ’96 Campaign Spotlight, No. 21: A Newsletter on American Politics*, Baltimore Sun columnists Jack Germond and Jules Witcover said, “Negative campaigns and commercials have become a significant factor in the alienation that keeps many potential voters from casting their ballots. They also may discourage otherwise highly qualified people from running for public office if they have anything in their backgrounds that might qualify as the topic for such commercials.”

Dave McNeely, a political reporter with the *Austin American-Statesman*, said politicians could avoid some negative coverage merely by treating members of the press with respect.

“Politicians should tell the truth and treat the press as they would anyone else. Reporters are like dogs: if you shout at them, try to kick them, or hide from them, they will bite your butt. If you talk softly to them, feed them and pet them, they will lick your hand.”
alking into the White House and asking to shoot the president is typically a ticket to jail. But for Dirck Halstead, nearly every day for roughly the last 30 years has begun just that way, minus the militant intentions.

From John Kennedy to William Clinton, Halstead has held the title of White House photographer, a coveted position only a few photographers have had the honor of holding. Halstead has the privilege of being the first.

“There was another photographer, a man by the name of Cecil Stoughton,” Halstead said. “When Kennedy became President and selected [Ted] Clifton as his military aide, Clifton really wanted to have somebody who would photograph the White House and do it journalistically. He picked up the telephone, started calling Cecil and me, and we became the first ‘real’ White House photographers, personal photographers to the President.”

Personal, of course, being a relative word.

“I wouldn’t say I know [President Clinton] personally, or even pretty well.” Halstead said. “I know him. But I don’t send him any Christmas cards. It wouldn’t be proper.”

Each president is, according to Halstead, “very distinctive,” and with each new administration comes a new rapport.

Gerald Ford, for example was “just a sweetheart of a guy. Very very nice man. Loved the photographers. Called them all by name. Carter, Bush, and Ford actually were the only ones who would call us (the photographers) by our first names.”

Three out of eight is questionably low considering the volume of time a “personal photographer to the president” spends at 1800 Pennsylvania Avenue.

“You go in there in the morning, and you’re there until late at night. It can be up to 18 hours during which time there may not be any photo-ops,” Halstead said.

Photo-ops or no photo-ops, spending such an extended amount of time close to the president offers Halstead and Cynthia Johnson, his counterpart, a unique view of the celebrities who are the center of the public relations efforts.

“Lyndon Johnson was totally outrageous,” Halstead said. “He was bigger than life. He liked to paint with broad strokes as you would say. He had no hesitation about insisting that Yoichi, his photographer, come in and shoot him when he was sitting on the toilet. He took great delight in always trying to be more outrageous.”

“Ronald Reagan was essentially a very simple guy. He was very comfortable in his own skin. And he was such a camera friendly person that he was a joy to photograph, whereas Carter, on the other hand, was a total and complete mess. Carter was the most miserable human being you ever saw in your life as a photographic subject. And so I bowed out. I left Washington for most of the four years that [he] was in power. He was just totally boring.”

“With Bush and Ford, though, you had so many opportunities for pictures that after a while when they’d call me to shoot something I would just say ‘go on [without me].’”

 “[Bush was] somebody who I loved to photograph. He’s a very nice man. Goofy sometimes. He had terrible problems with syntax.”

Observing the anecdotal nuances of individual presidents is only the first half of the job description. Recording those subtleties and showing them to readers is the other. Halstead is quick to make the distinction between pictures of the president shaking hands with diplomats and press conferences at the pressroom podium and the pictures he captures.

“I would like to think that as magazine photographers, our job is to interpret the presidency and to try to take pictures that have a sense of meaning and explain the moment and the mood. We’re always looking for something, always looking for a picture that will allow us to convey a sense of what that moment is all about. We don’t just go there to take snapshots.” ★
Covering politicians gives Iowa student a chance

To work with professionals

arrived at the fairgrounds the same as I do every year. I did not notice anything unusual about the state fair until I turned the corner by the Bill Riley stage and there they were: CNN, NBC, ABC and CBS. All the national broadcasting trucks and their satellites were parked in front of my eyes. I knew then and there I was in business.

I heard on the news that a few of the presidential candidates would be meeting at the Iowa State Fairgrounds. I asked my journalism adviser, Aaron Manfull, for a camera and a few rolls of film from the school. He hooked me up and I was off.

I was following a few photographers from the New York Times when suddenly a swarm of people came running down the street with video cameras and big microphones. I quickly jumped into the crowd and recognized Orrin Hatch, a real Presidential hopeful. I also found Steve Forbes that day and captured a few photos of him, but the best thing I took from the day was a bug, a bug that would consume me over the next few months. It was my goal from that day forth to get photos of all the presidential candidates.

I was quite fortunate to be in Iowa, site of the nation’s first caucus. I knew candidates would be visiting the state as they tried to gain early support of the party. I wasn’t really sure how I was going to go about things. I just knew I wanted to be involved. I approached Manfull at school about my idea. I had no real clue how to go about getting access to places where candidates would be and wasn’t even sure if I’d be able to. However, when I told Manfull of my plans, his reaction was not what I was expecting. Instead of the, “They don’t allow high schoolers to do that,” or “You’re too young,” he simply said, “OK, let’s make some calls.”

For the first dozen visits or so, gaining access was quite easy. Candidates visited the area every couple of weeks going places ranging from high schools to local restaurants. For me, it was simply a matter of finding out who was going to be where when. During the first few visits, I just kind of fell in line with the other photographers and emulated what they did. I began to figure out the system and learned to get to the venues early to secure a good spot from which to shoot.

The debates

During the debates, I realized that gaining access to a televised debate wasn’t going to be as easy as gaining access to the local cafe. Manfull suggested I call the debate’s organizer at the Des Moines Register, explain who I was and what I wanted.

I did.

I was told that generally high school press are not given passes to shoot, she would check. She spoke with my adviser the next day and then called me back the following day to let me know I could apply in light of all the other shooting I had done the past few months. After sending a few faxes and obtaining clearance from the Secret Service, I got a pass.

I was grouped with professional photographers from around the world and following the debate made my way down to shoot numerous photographs, highlighted by a series I shot of Tom Brokaw and George W. Bush talking following the debate. Things went so well I got credentials for the Democratic debate. While the Republican debate was neat, it was nothing compared to the Democratic show.

When I arrived at the site of the debate supporters of Al Gore and Bill Bradley were already lined up, waiting to get a glimpse of their man. As I was shooting the supporters I heard someone whisper that Gore was on his way. I quickly reloaded my camera so I would not have to as he was getting out of his car and miss everything. Suddenly two suburbans pulled around the corner escorted by a dozen police cars. After the caravan stopped, Gore got out. I was standing in the front, getting knocked around in all directions by the big video cameras. I took photo after photo hoping that at least one would turn out.

It did.

The final Republican debate, a week later, went in similar fashion, only with hundreds more supporters and more than a handful of candidates instead of two. It was that day I learned that the best photos aren’t always of what you think they will be. Some of the best photos I shot that day were not of the famous candidates but of the supporters who came out that day to pull for a candidate.

I ended up shooting a few photos the night of the actual caucus, and my photos ran not only in high school publications but also in our local paper.

After this year, those fairgrounds and local cafes will never be quite the same. And I can hardly wait for the fall election.
oth my friend Lily and I were avid followers of current events and politics. We both believed that, although not all of us could cast a vote, we should be able to know what our prospective leaders believed. So, even as we were assigning articles for our first issue, it was settled. Issue by issue, we would profile the major candidates in an attempt to educate the students at our school, trying to turn apathy into genuine interest.

In journalism class, at JEA conventions and, most recently, in an American Government course, I have repeatedly discussed the relationship between the media and politics. How a journalist writes an article, the tone, the diction and the clarity of it is so important because the journalist's reporting will shape the opinions of the readers. Journalists who paint a biased or incorrect picture give all other members of the media a bad name.

With all this in mind, Lily and I set out to write profiles of the candidates. Though we were not White House correspondents with national readerships, we were aware that our profiles might be the only source of knowledge on these candidates for some students. So we vowed to put all previous opinions aside, not realizing how hard that would be, and to objectively report on each candidate.

As we began to write our first set of profiles on Gore and Bush, we learned that correspondents have a much harder job than we first realized. Reporting on something as controversial as politics, something on which each individual has strong opinions, has to be a true test of our abilities as a journalist.

Lily and I came nowhere near passing the test. Like all writers attempting something this complicated for the first time, we became very frustrated. Through many edits by a variety of people we ended up with a final draft that was almost objective.

I hoped, as I gave my article to my classmates to be copy edited, that there would be at least one student who had an opinion of the candidate I profiled that contradicted my opinion because he would be the one who found bias in my article. Instead, criticism from those students helped me begin to find the hidden bias in my own writing — seen in words like “good” and “bad” and extremes like “always” and “never.” After learning these basics from writing the first profile on Bush, I found writing my second profile, on McCain, much easier.

As with everything else, I had a learning experience. The second draft was better than the first, and the third was better than the second. I wish I could provide some insight about how to tackle an article on politics, but I can’t. What I can say is that it definitely worth trying to tackle. Being able to feel that you have written something of value that might change one student's apathy into interest is reason enough to try.

After all, even the White House correspondents had to start somewhere.