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From Crisis to Stasis: Media Dynamics and Issue Attention in the News

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Summary and Keywords

Media coverage does not ebb and flow. Rather, media coverage rapidly moves from crisis to stasis and back again. The result of these attention dynamics is news reporting that is disproportional to the breadth and pace of policy problems in the world, where some balloon in the news beyond expectations and others fade quickly (or never make the news at all). These patterns of news coverage result from the powerful role that momentum plays in the news-generation process. Forces of positive feedback drive news outlets to chase each new hot story quickly, while negative feedback forces drive news outlets to stay locked onto a hot story at hand. Together, these forces drive news coverage to lurch and fixate, lurch and fixate, again and again. Thus, although previous research has conceived of the news-generation process functioning either as a “patrol” system (where news outlets act as sentinels, tracking each policy problem as it unfolds in the world) or as an “alarm” system (where news outlets move in quick bursts from one policy problem to the next, with little to no in-depth coverage), both these previous models tell only half the story. Rather, the news-generation process is best understood through the alarm/patrol hybrid model, where news outlets often lurch from one hot item to the next but sometimes become entrenched in an unfolding storyline. The alarm/patrol hybrid model helps explain the particular phenomenon of “media storms” that can occur, where a sudden surge in media attention can vault a previously ignored issue into the center of public and political attention; think of the Catholic priest abuse scandal, or the scene in Ferguson, Missouri, after Michael Brown’s death. The lurching/fixating dynamics of media attention have far-ranging implications for citizen information and political response, contributing to a wider system of disproportionate information processing where some topics are attended to and others are largely ignored. In particular, because policymakers take so many of their cues from the news, it is likely the case that the lurching/fixating patterns of our media system exacerbate the punctuated patterns of government in turn.

Keywords: media, news, attention dynamics, agenda-setting, punctuated equilibrium, alarm, patrol

Introduction

On August 9, 2014, an 18-year-old African-American male named Michael Brown was fatally shot by white police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri, a suburb of St. Louis. According to reports, Brown was walking down the street with a friend when Wilson instructed them to move to the sidewalk. From that point forward, the details of Brown's death are murky. Questions about how or if Brown engaged the officer, whether the officer used excess force, and the accuracy of eyewitness accounts remain unanswered. Within 24 hours candlelight vigils turned violent, businesses were looted, and at least 30 people were arrested amid the chaos that reigned. Meanwhile, newspaper reporters, TV camera crews, and a slew of social media correspondents descended on Ferguson, producing nonstop media coverage of the unfolding situation. A city whose population could comfortably fit four times over into a football stadium had spurred a sustained national debate about Michael Brown's shooting and, more broadly, the long-term relationship (or lack thereof) between the black community and public safety officials. The death of one black man blanketed national news coverage, sharing *New York Times* headlines with a rapidly spreading Ebola virus described as the most severe in decades, and pushing a tenuous Israeli-Palestinian ceasefire inside the fold. The importance of Michael Brown's death cannot be ignored. Yet how do we reconcile the fact that in the month following Brown's death one of the world's leading newspapers, *The New York Times*, published nearly 300 articles on the Ferguson community and only 115 articles on disease outbreaks in Africa that contributed to the deaths of nearly 10,000 people and only 155 articles on the Middle Eastern conflicts that produced thousands of deaths across Israel and the Gaza Strip?

The media's sustained focus on the Michael Brown case highlights how patterns in news coverage contribute to the disproportionate nature of news reporting and how, as an institution, the media rapidly moves from crisis to stasis and back again. The disproportionate nature of the media's response to events and issues—where some balloon in the news beyond expectations and others fade quickly (or never make the news at all)—is the result of a news-generation process that does not produce calm ebbs and flows in attention; the news rarely moves gradually from one event or issue to the next. Rather, the media are part of a dynamic institution that, driven by strong momentum, tends to lurch and then fixate, lurch and then fixate, again and again. For evidence of this lurching/fixating momentum in the news—and the public attention it both feeds from and feeds—just look at the fact that CNN's viewership increased by 60% in August 2014, when the nation tuned in to the situation in Ferguson. Between one day and the next, the nation's media lurched attention to the hot news item of Ferguson. And then for weeks on

end (an eternity in the news business), viewers remained transfixed as media attention locked onto the evolving Ferguson storyline, day after day.

The nature of media dynamics—lurching from stasis to crisis, becoming fixated (statically) on the crisis, and then latching on to the next hot item—is important in its own right; it means that citizens reading or watching the news get wildly disproportionate signals about the severity and length of real-world problems (although there are some benefits to these media dynamics, as discussed below in “IMPLICATIONS FOR POLITICS AND SOCIETY”). These disproportionate signals are inherently important, that is to say, since media signals can influence political attitudes, participation, and preferences (McCombs, 2014). But the fact that media coverage changes in a lurching/fixating way over time is also important because our political institutions (namely, Congress and the presidency) and the policy processes that operate within them follow this same pattern of change, raising the question of whether the media may serve to exacerbate these lurching/fixating patterns in government. For many years, scholars ignored the dynamics of media attention and, thus, the possible effects media dynamics may have on the complexities of policy agendas and elite publics. Yet because policymakers take so many of their cues from the news, it is likely the case that the lurching/fixating patterns of our media system exacerbate, in turn, the punctuated patterns of government. In other words, the media’s influence on society and politics is not merely a linear process, where the public and elected officials consistently and uniformly respond to changes in the world as conveyed by news outlets. Rather, the way the media process and skew attention toward certain real-world problems may strongly affect the dynamics of public and government attention to those problems.

This chapter unpacks the notion of disproportionate information processing in the media by reviewing its origins in the policy agendas literature. It highlights the media as an institution characterized by explosive change and skewed issue attention rather than even-keeled change and an even distribution of attention across issues. Next, it discusses the mechanisms behind these news patterns by better understanding the norms of coverage that contribute to this disproportionate output of news. As news coverage fluctuates between lurches and fixations, this pattern of explosive change influences and reinforces negative and positive feedback cycles that explain why some issues receive more coverage than others. The chapter then describes a model of the news-generation process—called the alarm/patrol hybrid model—that helps us understand these dynamics and the patterns in news coverage that result. It goes on to discuss the particular phenomenon of “media storms”—those sudden and sustained surges in media attention that can vault a previously neglected issue into the center of public and political attention. It concludes by discussing how the cycles of media attention have far-ranging implications for citizen information and political response, contributing to a wider system

of disproportionate information processing where some topics are attended to and others are largely ignored. Going forward, we must understand the media as a critical source for the self-reinforcing political process that reacts disproportionately to information sources, and consider the policy implications for a media agenda where shifts in attention can be rapid and explosive.

Disproportionate Information Processing

First to be considered is the foundational work of disproportionate information processing in the context of policy agendas. The notion of disproportionate information processing (i.e., giving an uneven amount of attention to policy problems, relative to their severity) was first developed by Bryan Jones in *Politics and the Architecture of Choice* (Jones, 2001). Initially, disproportionate information processing was thought to be a unique explanation for the political process within the U.S. federal government. Yet recent studies highlight the applicability of this process across political systems and institutions—one of which is the media (Jones, 2001; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005). Still, the cyclical nature of agenda change and a punctuated policy process are a relatively new understanding. Previous notions of policy change characterized the policy process as one that produced incremental changes in government outputs and policies, similar to a static, ebb-and-flow model of media coverage (Wildavsky, 1964). This interpretation was applied in particular to the actions of formal institutions, like Congress, where budgeting seemed to follow an incremental pattern of minimal change from year to year. But evidence from more recent scholarship suggests that an incremental model of activity is as incomplete for political institutions as it is for media activity (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009, 2015). How do we explain large shifts in policy, like the transformed discussion of nuclear policy in the United States from a topic of energy alternatives to a topic of security and environmental threats (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009)? Was the shift from tobacco as an agricultural product to a health priority slow and gradual?

Scholars have found that although policy does often operate via a gradual shift or general stasis, it is additionally susceptible to episodic and large shocks that result in significant policy change, often accompanied by a complete reframing of how we conceptualize and prioritize the underlying policy problem. Limited attention and scarce agenda space produce a system that is often incremental because there is minimal opportunity for additional information. Yet ignored information, a buildup of tension, and sudden and harmful events (called “focusing” events; Birkland, 1998) can prompt cascades of attention (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005), propelling new issues onto the agendas of political actors.

The result is that political agendas tend to fluctuate between sudden, lurching change and extended fixation.

Two mechanisms are responsible for these lurching/fixating dynamics: negative feedback and positive feedback. Negative feedback is the process by which changes in a system are “corrected” by an opposing pull back toward an equilibrium; think of a digital thermostat set at a baseline temperature, where each time the room’s temperature drops too low, the heat comes on to warm things up. In the context of an institutional agenda, negative feedback serves to stabilize the agenda around an equilibrium, such that the allocation of attention across issues remains relatively fixed. This thermostatic nature of change also has been used to explain public responsiveness to policy outputs, a relationship where the media is often the source of information about those policy outputs (Wlezien, 1995). When a system is subject to negative feedback cycles, an initial disturbance attenuates and becomes smaller as it moves forward in time (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009). An example of this feedback process is the limited change surrounding U.S. social security policy, where attention remains relatively fixed, barely deviating from the status quo. Underlying this negative feedback cycle are a host of institutional incentives that keep individual political actors and agencies from bucking existing policy.

Traditional models of the policy process highlighted the twin pillars of negative feedback and incrementalism—explaining a process of deliberate, minimal updates. But these models paint a picture of the policy and news-generation process that is only half complete, ignoring those instances when an issue suddenly gains momentum and lurches from one point to the next. We must take a broader view of the feedback processes that can lead to both minimal and drastic change, and positive feedback provides a counter to negative feedback in the dynamic news-generation process.

Under positive feedback cycles, changes in the system are not subtly corrected but instead reinforced, leading the system to spiral, explosively, away from equilibrium; think of fashion trends, population booms, and viral spreads of disease or information, where in each case change begets even more change at an exponential rate (Bikhchandani, Hirshleifer, & Welch, 1992). Positive feedback mechanisms reinforce changes that begin to take hold on an agenda, leading to sudden and dramatic agenda upheaval, displacing the current allocation of attention with an entirely new one. Much of the institutional momentum that can shape the policy agenda is due to positive feedback, which is propelled and sometimes sustained by media institutions. An example of positive feedback is the United States’ rapid adoption of equal marriage rights by same-sex couples, where successive policies, court decisions, and public opinion reinforced a cascading series of quick, successive shifts in civil rights policy. Underlying this positive feedback cycle are a host of social and institutional incentives that encourage citizens,

news outlets, and political actors to jump on the bandwagon of shifting societal and policy norms.

Together, forces of negative and positive feedback drive policy agendas to change not gradually, but rather in fits and starts. But what does the media have to do with shifts in policy agendas? A lot. Since political actors pay attention to the news, it makes sense that patterns of attention in the news tend to influence patterns of attention in the policy process. Specifically, the media's disproportionate information processing likely amplifies the government's disproportionate information processing. And this amplification occurs both in the case of positive feedback and negative feedback cycles. In their formative work on punctuated equilibrium, Baumgartner and Jones (2009) described the media's ability to contribute to positive feedback cycles. And Wolfe (2012) finds that the media can sometimes "put the brakes" on the policy process, contributing to policy stability. Wolfe's work highlights the dynamic effects of the media on the policy process, showing that the effect of media coverage on policy is conditional on the type of attention cycle at play. In short, given the fact that the media is one of the main sources of information for policymakers, and given the fact that the media processes information disproportionately, via using exactly the same type of positive and negative feedback we see in government, it should come as no surprise that media attention further exacerbates (and sometimes corrects) the disproportionate way in which government processes information and makes policy. Although we don't yet know the precise elements that spur positive feedback versus negative feedback in the news, we do know that these twin forces matter for government.

Next is a discussion of the patterns in the news that foster these media dynamics—patterns that, as noted, have key implications for how citizens and policymakers perceive policy problems.

Patterns in News Coverage

The manner in which journalists report the news shapes the issues people think about, how they think about them, and what actions government takes in response (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; McCombs, Shaw, & Weaver, 1997). But compared to the importance of the news, for a long time scholars knew very little about the journalistic patterns that determine which issues become news in the first place. Because news patterns have implications for both elite and mass publics, the process by which the news is produced deserves our attention. To understand the news-generation process, we must first understand the media's role as a political institution. The media conducts its work based on systematic rules and procedures that have endured and

evolved over time. The diverse array of news outlets that comprise the mass media—including newspapers, magazines, radio, broadcast and cable television, and online news outlets—constitutes an institution (Cook, 1998; Sparrow, 2006). And like any formal political institution, “the” media (which of course is comprised of a wide array of news outlets) has norms and routines that affect the daily decision-making process and outputs. These norms drive issue coverage in the news, in turn affecting how issues are reported and received.

As the fluctuating media coverage of Ferguson suggests, news norms do not lead to ebb and flow shifts in news; rather, attention to issues in the news fixates and explodes. The explosive nature of media dynamics (where the term “explosiveness” encompasses both the lurching and fixating dynamics) produces skewed media attention across policy issues, such that a few issues receive the lion’s share of coverage while most issues go uncovered. Thus, for most events and issues, most of the time, news coverage is out of proportion with their “objective importance,” meaning that the event/issue receives much less or much more coverage than may be warranted, relative to larger trends. In thinking of examples of disproportionately high news coverage, we may include the dispute over the young Cuban boy Elian Gonzalez in 2000, the kidnapping of Elizabeth Smart in 2002, and the arrest of Senator Larry Craig for alleged lewd conduct in a men’s bathroom in 2007. Each of these events was undoubtedly important, but surely received much more attention than similar events in different circumstances (or involving a different type of actor) would likely receive. At the other end of this spectrum are events that receive a scarcity of attention in comparison with their significance, by any quantifiable standards. Examples include instances of human trafficking in China (one story on the *Times* front page between 1996 and 2006, for example); female genital mutilation in Africa and the Middle East (zero front-page stories during that period); humanitarian violations in the Sudan (21 front-page stories during that period); and domestic abuse cases in the United States (one front-page story during that period).

Critical to understanding patterns of news coverage, of course, is the fundamental notion of attention (that is, the relative amount of time an individual or institution spends on a given issue). The allocation of attention is one of the most powerful resources in the political system, as those policies that garner the attention of political actors are more likely to make it onto the political agenda. In the U.S. news media, attention is what distinguishes events and policy issues that become matters of media and public discussion from those that go unnoticed. Thus, the lurching/fixating shifts in media attention over time are important because they mean that citizens watching the news will be thrust into this same pattern of thinking about events and issues in fits and starts. Human beings have limited attention spans, and these cognitive limits require a hierarchical assessment of priorities. Attention to a specific problem or interest will

consume scarce agenda space and create a crowding effect that forces prioritization (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005). This prioritization leads to some issues being addressed beyond their relevance while others are ignored because there is simply no available agenda space. Moreover, because the lurching/fixating media dynamics tend to prioritize a certain type of issue (e.g., political scandal) over others (e.g., agriculture), many policy issues that demand and deserve our attention rarely if ever make the news (and, thus, the awareness of the average citizen). How often do you see breaking news about community housing or social welfare policies? And, as noted in the “INTRODUCTION,” this skew of media attention across issues not only blankets the televisions and coffee tables of the public, but also feeds back into the political system, affecting the agendas set by elected officials and policy actors.

Alarm/Patrol Coverage

Taking a step back, we can understand the lurching/fixating dynamics of the media by considering which media model best describes how news outlets cover events and issues. Which model of news generation best captures the disproportionate nature of coverage we observe? This chapter describes previous “patrol” and “alarm” models of media attention and then outlines the “alarm/patrol hybrid model” that, it is argued, better describes the news-generation process.

The baseline model of journalistic reporting reflects Hollywood depictions of media institutions as eager “watchdogs” capable of Watergate-like reporting. This watchdog archetype suggests a patrol model of news generation, whereby news outlets are on constant surveillance, scanning the streets and alleys of society and politics in order to know what’s going on with events and issues at all times, and then conveying necessary information to a democratic society. The idea of a patrol system of surveillance is not without warrant in the media environment—it is that sustained coverage after a spike in attention that can perpetuate an instance of sustained high attention like we saw in Ferguson. The classic example of this model is the Watergate scandal, where Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein sustained their investigation into the hotel break-in rather than quickly moving on to the next scandal (Boydston, 2013). But the news patterns surrounding Watergate are largely infeasible if we consider only a patrol model of coverage—indeed, in the case of Watergate the news coverage was not initiated by Woodward and Bernstein patrolling the political beat; it was triggered, literally, by an alarm. Multiple scholars have argued that the patrol model is simply not an accurate reflection of the news (Bennett, 2003; Zaller, 2003), especially in a media climate where time and fiscal resources are scarce.

Instead, some studies suggest that, rather than operating as a patrol system, the media operates instead as an alarm system (under the metaphor of a burglar alarm system of surveillance), attending only to those events/issues that trigger social or political hype (Zaller, 2003). The alarm model of news generation argues that media attention tracks crisis issues as they arise. Similar to fire alarm characterizations of Congress, the media as an institution is better positioned to react to events rather than to conduct routine oversight by monitoring every facet of congressional operations or dealing with problems proportionally as they arise (McCubbins & Schwartz, 1984). Examples of alarm coverage would be responding to an unexpected press conference or the immediate coverage that follows political scandal, like the social media downfall of Congressman Anthony Weiner.

Yet, while cash-strapped media organizations may be more likely to follow press releases and political conflict because they require fewer journalists on patrol, the presence of investigative reports—like the *Washington Post*'s scathing report of veterans' care at Walter Reed—render an alarm-only model just as incomplete as an exclusively patrol-based model. The renowned Pulitzer Prize has been given to the best work in investigative journalism—that is, in-depth patrol journalism—since 1985, and the wealth of pieces considered for this prize every year shows us that investigative journalism is far from dead. Thus, just as the patrol model of news generation fails to capture the reality of scarce resources, the alarm model fails to account for the incentives news outlets have to fixate on storylines, be they fast-breaking events like Ferguson or in-depth investigative-journalism-style reporting on issues like the Catholic priest abuse scandal or the health hazards of fire retardants. Like the policy process, the media is a dynamic institution that will shift its news-gathering process and institutional norms given a changing political and societal environment. In short, news outlets certainly do not operate strictly as patrol watchdogs, but neither do they operate strictly under an alarm system of news generation. The distinction between these modes is highly theoretical; in practice, things are not nearly so clean and journalists and editors do not make conscious decisions between the two modes (Boydston, 2013).

Instead, Boydston (2013) posits that the news-generation process is best understood under an “alarm/patrol hybrid” model. Under the alarm/patrol hybrid model, we can think of these lurching dynamics as the give-and-take between two modes of news generation: alarm mode and patrol mode. The hybrid model makes no normative assumption about how the media should operate, but rather it better captures how the media does operate—and more specifically, the type of coverage produced in the aggregate.

Under the hybrid model, Boydston offers four categories of news generation:

- Alarm mode only—producing a momentary media explosion with a brief burst of coverage around an event or issue (e.g., Michael Jackson’s death, the Haiti earthquake)
- Patrol mode only—producing either beat reporting or, at times, a timed media explosion with an extended period of attention to an event or issue, with either low or high levels of coverage (e.g., New York City’s war on crime, the Olympics)
- Neither mode fully engaged—producing low levels of coverage to the event or issue (e.g., human interest stories, crime reporting)
- Alarm/patrol mode—producing a sustained media explosion (also known as a “media storm”; see “MEDIA STORMS”) characterized by a surge in coverage that is then continued for a period (e.g., Hurricane Katrina, the Catholic priest abuse scandal)

As these categories show, the media does not always operate in alarm/patrol mode; sometimes it operates in alarm-only mode, sometimes patrol-only mode, and sometimes in neither mode. But of the four modes of news generation this model describes, the namesake alarm/patrol mode holds particular significance for understanding the episodic and disproportionate nature of news coverage. We can also see how this hybrid mode (producing a “media storm”) is not always spurred solely by an event, but often by the incentives of the media organization(s) themselves. Exactly when an individual news outlet shifts from alarm mode to patrol mode may depend upon whether the news item is of particular interest to journalists or readers. For example, the Catholic priest abuse scandal was initially uncovered not by a national or global change in events but by investigations and momentum spurred by a single news outlet, the *Boston Globe*. Shifts in the model of coverage may then be mimicked and patterned across multiple media outlets; news organizations move together in herd formation (Boydston, 2013).

The dynamic interplay of both the alarm and patrol perspectives sheds light on why news outlets lurch attention to alarms but, given scarce resources and strong momentum, may stay locked on and monitor the alarm well past the initial spark. Usually, a news outlet will be engaged in at least one media explosion (momentary, timed, or sustained) at any given time. Beneath and between these cyclical explosions are inter-event periods of relative calm—in some policy issue areas, at least—when a news outlet will continue to attend to the bread-and-butter issues of its beat reporting system; Birkland calls these quiet periods (1998, pp. 61–62). Like all other strategic actors, journalists must make the most of their resources. Once the alarm is pulled, journalists routinely take advantage of the opportunity to cull information and additional stories for a sustained period of time.

In short, the alarm/patrol hybrid model points to a particular type of information the media sends, systematically, to elite and mass publics—namely, information that changes not gradually but in fits and starts over time and, as a result, information that is wildly

skewed across policy areas. In this way, despite journalists' best attempts at diverse and balanced news coverage, the media has the potential to disproportionately shift issue priorities in public opinion and in the policymaking process.

Media Storms

As discussed above in "ALARM/PATROL COVERAGE," it is the interplay of patrol and alarm coverage in the hybrid model that leads to a special type of media coverage, what Boydston, Hardy, and Walgrave (2014) call "media storms" (i.e., sustained media explosions). Media storms are not short spikes of attention that end as suddenly as they began, but consist of longer "plateaus" of very high attention. Media storms typify the disproportionate news-generation process as news outlets rapidly attend to hot new items, but in these cases instead of quickly moving on to the next scandal by Kim Kardashian, the media fixates its laser focus on the unfolding event or issue at hand, sustaining its heightened attention beyond an issue's relative importance. Four criteria characterize a media storm: size, explosiveness, duration, and reach across the media system (Boydston et al., 2014). Two mechanisms lead to media storms: (a) lower gatekeeping thresholds: when news outlets temporarily change their news selection process and lower the thresholds of newsworthiness; and (b) imitation: news outlets' tendencies to imitate one another's news selection decisions (Boydston et al., 2014). Media storms are thus the product of the positive feedback forces that spur media to pay attention to specific events or issues in the first place (e.g., the baseball doping scandal, 9/11, Ferguson), which attention is then compounded by the media's extended fixation on those events. The result is strong overrepresentation of some issues on media and political agendas (e.g., natural disasters, scandals) at the necessary exclusion of other issues (e.g., agriculture subsidies, social security).

Media storms highlight the endogeneity between policy and media coverage, since the duration of a storm likely depends on how political actors respond. If elites keep talking about the issue—and, in so doing, keep producing events that are worth covering like congressional hearings or investigations—the storm's momentum continues and agendas are further shaped. Importantly, as an issue gains traction in the news and continues to escalate and maintain its place on the news media agenda, the relative skew of an issue compared to competing stores increases. Thus, media storms exacerbate the skewed attention across issues, since each additional story fixated on the event or issue at the center of a media storm is one less story available to other important events and issues.

One example of a media storm is the coverage after Hurricane Katrina. While many variables were at play to push the media into alarm/patrol mode surrounding the

devastation in New Orleans, the main force driving this hybrid coverage was the event itself (Boydston, 2013). Katrina constituted a focusing event—a shock external to the media institution—marked by suddenness, extreme harm, and the displacement of hundreds of thousands (Birkland, 1998; Boydston, 2013). The event initially received alarm-based coverage that was mostly at the surface level (reporting on the facts of the storm itself). But because news outlets had strong incentives to stay fixated on the hurricane (knowing the public would stay tuned in), patrol-based coverage quickly followed. And it was this patrol-based coverage that prompted heightened national attention to a wide range of systemic issues that sustained Americans' attention beyond just the natural disaster. In the surveillance coverage that followed Katrina, journalists on patrol in Louisiana and the Mississippi Delta helped shed light on several preexisting policy problems, including racial disparities in the distribution of social services, the fallibilities of the federal emergency response, and housing regulations.

Just like decision-making within a political institution, we can think of the unfolding of a media storm as a process: the nature of an event combines with institutional incentives to provide the momentum that sends the media into alarm mode and then, in response to the heightened attention, journalists continue to patrol the issue for new frames, hooks, or relevant information (Boydston, 2013). The result is a near-monopoly of the media agenda's spotlight, casting the event/issue in question into sharp relief while leaving little light to shine on anything else.

Implications for Politics and Society

The patterns that underlie the newspapers we pick up each morning, the coverage we tune into every night on TV, or the news stories shared on Facebook that we scroll through on our phones, are endemic to the media as an institution, and they affect not only how the public receives information but also how our political institutions process that same news. We know that our elected officials have limited attention, and must prioritize information in order to deal with the oversupply of information, cues, and frames coming from the media, the public, and special interests. What we often don't understand are the underlying factors that determine what issues members attend to and thus make it onto the limited policy agenda. One of these factors is undoubtedly the media's response to events and the types of issues that show up in the newspapers or magazines that politicians keep in their office. The government is one of Washington, D.C.'s biggest subscribers, so it comes as no surprise that the media is one of many sources of policy information and frames that produce and contribute to fluctuating changes in the policy process and the interplay of positive and negative feedback cycles.

The maintenance of a disjointed and punctuated policy process within our formal institutions is, in part, a result of policy inputs. The media's tendency to fluctuate between different types of news coverage (lurching and fixating) and the rapid or restrained responses contour the policy feedback systems that constrain the information supplied to the political process. To understand how the policy system shifts its limited attention (e.g., spending more time on defense policy than civil rights legislation) we must understand the patterns by which media generates the news in the first place, giving a disproportionate amount of attention across policy issues and fostering an agenda that is highly susceptible to disjointed shocks.

The media's institutionally ingrained tendency to move from crisis to stasis and back again is thus disturbing, from a normative perspective, because it drives citizens and policymakers alike to under-attend to (or ignore altogether) important policy problems. Yet there is an important silver lining to the media's disproportionate information processing: when an issue becomes a media storm, it can surpass that invisible threshold of awareness, prompting meaningful social and political change. This chapter has discussed, for example, how the patrol-based media coverage following Hurricane Katrina raised issues of racial injustice that too often go ignored. Or consider the case of Terri Schiavo, the comatose woman at the center of a family battle that resulted in a court-ordered removal of her feeding tube in 2005—a battle complicated by the fact that Schiavo had no living will. After the media storm surrounding Schiavo's case, the number of Americans with registered living wills increased fourfold from the previous year. As yet another example, consider the Catholic priest abuse scandal. Of all alleged abuse incidents that occurred between 1950 and 2002, less than 0.5% occurred in 2002 (the year that the *Boston Globe* broke the story). Yet nearly one-third of victims from that 53-year span came forward in 2002 alone, suggesting that the media storm surrounding the abuse de-stigmatized the reporting of previous abuse, giving victims the sense of solidarity they needed to come forward. Thus, the media dynamics of lurching and fixating that leave most policy problems, most of the time, without the attention they deserve also result in important moments of social and political awareness. It is that heightened awareness that may, in turn, drive policymakers to action on issues they previously ignored—such as the congressional hearings that followed the *Washington Post's* coverage of veterans' conditions at Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

Looking ahead, a critical piece to understanding the implications of media skew is the power of momentum. Underlying the skewed and explosive patterns in the news, momentum drives the news-generation process. Momentum can reinforce change, triggering a disproportionate amount of attention to an issue. And momentum can reinforce fixation, keeping the media (and other political institutions) locked in place. Although policy agendas scholars have documented the significance of dynamic positive

and negative feedback processes and the types of mechanisms constantly pulling a system (e.g., the media, congressional hearings) toward both states, we don't yet know what tips a system from a negative feedback process to a positive feedback one, or vice versa. Thus, the key to understanding the role of media attention in the political system is to understand more precisely how it both responds to and fuels cascades of attention. Since news outlets feed off of anticipated public interest in an event or issue, citizens (and politicians) play a key role in driving the momentum that determines which issues make the news and when. But at the same time, since the media is the primary source of information for citizens and politicians alike, the issues that make the news—in lurching/fixating fashion—will in turn drive the momentum that shapes how public and governmental attention is allocated. Going forward, then, momentum should be at the center of research on policy agendas and, in particular, media attention.

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