

# MEDIA ABUNDANCE AND DEMOCRACY

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## Abstract

The "information revolution" is empowering citizens in ways previously unimaginable but, judging from the American case, "information" might not be one of them. Americans appear to be increasingly misinformed about politics and government, and information levels have declined among the young. The reasons lie partly in the high-choice media environment that has emerged as a result of changes in communication technology. An abundance of entertainment options, a weakening of demand for news, the emergence of partisan talk shows, the increased use of deceptive communication practices by political elites, and changes in journalism underpin the change.

## Keywords

Journalism; Misinformation; Information level; Political communication; News media.

It is claimed that the "information age" is transforming democracy, empowering ordinary citizens in ways previously unimaginable. However much that prediction might apply to some areas, it appears not to be true when it comes to information itself. Judging from the American case, media abundance works against an informed public.

Americans appear to be losing touch with reality. At one point in the 2009-2010 debate over health care reform bill, for instance, nearly half of Americans claimed that the legislation included so-called "death panels" – government-review committees that would decide whether terminally ill patients would be allowed further medical treatment<sup>1</sup>. Or take the example of climate change. As the world's nation's were gathering in Copenhagen for the 2009 United Nations Conference on Climate Change, 55 percent of Americans expressed the view that global warming is not occurring or is due entirely to natural causes<sup>2</sup>. Or consider the months preceding the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Contrary to fact, half of the American public thought Iraq was aligned with al Qaeda, the terrorist group that attacked the United States on September 11, 2001. Some of these Americans mistakenly assumed that Iraq helped plan the attacks; others erroneously believed that Iraq was equipping al Qaeda<sup>3</sup>.

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1 Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll, August 2009.

2 CNN poll, December 2009.

3 "Misperceptions, the Media, and the Iraq War," Report of the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA), University of Maryland, October 2, 2003.

Warped understandings are not wholly new. When fluoride was added to the water supply a half century ago, some Americans saw it as a communist plot. Fluoride, they claimed, would sicken the population, making it easy prey for the Soviets. In a seminal 1964 *Atlantic Journal* article, the historian Richard Hofstadter described such thinking as "the paranoid style." "I call it the paranoid style," Hofstadter wrote, "simply because no other word adequately evokes the sense of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy that I have in mind."<sup>4</sup>

Unreasoning fear, prejudice, and partisanship distort people's perceptions. The fervent anti-communism of twentieth century America had its parallel in the rabid anti-Catholicism of nineteenth-century America, and has its match today. What except elements of the "paranoid style" could account for the 14 percent of Republicans who say Barack Obama was "definitely" born outside the United States?<sup>5</sup>

But paranoia cannot by itself explain current levels of misinformation. The "paranoid style," as Hofstadter noted, typifies the thinking of only a fraction of the public whereas it is not unusual today to find issues on which a large plurality or even a majority are misinformed. Such is the case with global warming and was the case with the invasion of Iraq. A particularly revealing survey was one conducted by Harvard's Robert Blendon in the 1990s, which asked respondents to identify the five-year trend in unemployment, inflation, and the federal budget deficit. Roughly two-thirds of respondents said the budget deficit had worsened, half claimed inflation has increased, and a third said joblessness had risen<sup>6</sup>. In fact, the trend in each case was the opposite. Unemployment had declined, as had inflation and the deficit.

The nineteenth-century humorist Josh Billings said "it's better to know nothing than to know what ain't so." The problem today is that the public is deficient in *both* areas.

Information has never been the public's strong suit. Bruce Ackerman and James Fishkin put it bluntly: "If six decades of modern public opinion research establish anything, it is that the general public's political ignorance is appalling by any standard."<sup>7</sup> Large numbers of Americans cannot recall the names of congressional candidates, do not know where the constitutional powers of Congress end and those of the president begin, and possess little understanding of what major legislative proposals entail<sup>8</sup>.

If such findings are familiar, the level of ignorance today is at least somewhat surprising.

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4 Richard Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," *Harper's Magazine*, November 1964, p. 77.

5 CNN/Opinion Research poll, July 2010.

6 William J. Cromie, "American Public is Misinformed, Distrustful, New Study Finds," *Harvard Gazette*, December 5, 1996. Web copy

7 Bruce Ackerman and James S. Fishkin, *Deliberation Day* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 7.

8 See, Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

In the period after World War II, studies showed an upward trend in citizens' awareness of public affairs<sup>9</sup>. The trend line is no longer rising<sup>10</sup>. Today's citizens have a poorer understanding of some topics than even their counterparts of six decades ago, when the typical adult had only a grade-school education. The voters of 1948, for instance, knew more about Harry Truman's and Thomas Dewey's positions on price controls and the Taft-Hartley Act than the voters of 2000 knew of George Bush's and Al Gore's stands on tax cuts and prescription drug benefits<sup>11</sup>.

Why have Americans come to misunderstand more and, perhaps, to know less? Several factors are at work but changes in communication top the list. Americans have been ill-served by the communicators – the journalists, politicians, talk-show hosts, pundits, activists, bloggers, and public relations specialists – that purport to be their guides. Americans have also been ill-served by their own actions. They have distanced themselves from the few reliable sources still available to them.

### The high-choice media system

Walter Lippmann questioned whether the public could play the role that democracy assigned it. How could citizens cast an informed vote or form an informed opinion if they were politically ignorant? Democratic theorists, he argued, had mistakenly assumed "that somehow mysteriously there exists in the hearts of men a knowledge of the world beyond their reach."<sup>12</sup>

In *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), the philosopher John Dewey took issue with Lippmann's assessment. Dewey shared Lippmann's concern with public ignorance and acknowledged the numbing distractions of everyday life. But Dewey was convinced that improvements in public education and communication could "create a great community."<sup>13</sup>

Dewey's optimism appeared justified for a time. In a study of public opinion in the 1950s, Harvard political scientist V.O. Key noted the relationship between education and information. The college-educated were three times more likely than other citizens to understand the implications of various policy options<sup>14</sup>. The problem, as Key saw it, was that only 10 percent of the adult population had a college degree. With college enrollments steadily rising, the prospect of a well informed public seemed to be mostly a matter of time.

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9 Marcus Prior, *Post-Broadcast Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 74-84.

10 Donald F. Roberts, Uila G. Foehr, Victoria J. Rideout, and Mollyann Brodie, "Kids and Media at the New Millennium," A Kaiser Family Foundation Report, November 1999.

11 Thomas E. Patterson, *The Vanishing Voter* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 126.

12 Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Free Press, 1997), p. 19. First published in 1922.

13 John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (New York: Holt, 1927), p. 142.

14 V.O. Key, Jr., *Public Opinion and American Democracy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961), p. 342.

Changes in communication were also cause for optimism. Although nearly 30 million Americans read the daily newspaper in the 1920s, they represented less than half of the adult population. The introduction of broadcast news provided a breakthrough. Television news had an especially large audience, much of it "inadvertent" – viewers who watched the news less from an interest in it than from an obsession with television<sup>15</sup>. The news had a monopoly on the dinner hour, and avid viewers had no choice but to sit through it, with the result that three-fourths of Americans by the 1960s were following the news on a daily basis through one outlet or another<sup>16</sup>.

Within a decade, the public's information reached a new high<sup>17</sup>. Although exposure to television news did not significantly improve the knowledge level of regular newspaper readers or the highly educated, it did increase that of the less interested and the less-well-educated. "Television," Princeton's Marcus Prior notes, "made it easier [for them] to learn about politics."<sup>18</sup>

The gain was short lived. Cable television's entertainment programs were cutting into the news audience. In 1980, only about 10 percent of American homes had cable. By decade's end, more than 50 percent had it. Viewers now had a choice at the dinner hour.

Although broadcast news did not lose most of its regulars, it lost the capacity to regenerate its audience. Many of the viewers that earlier were part of its "inadvertent audience" had gradually developed a liking for news<sup>19</sup>. But with the advent of cable, less-interested adults turned to entertainment content, reducing the likelihood that they would eventually acquire a daily news habit.

A bigger loss was a generational one. Television news in the 1960s and 1970 was an early-evening ritual in many families and, though the children might have preferred something else, they sat through it. By the time they had graduated from high school, most of them had acquired a television news habit of their own<sup>20</sup>. Cable broke the link. Fewer parents were watching the news and, even if they were, as a Kaiser Family Foundation study revealed, the children were usually in another room watching something else<sup>21</sup>. Research showed that, among children growing up in the 1980s, those in a household with cable

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15 Michael J. Robinson, "Public Affairs Television and the Growth of Political Malaise," *American Political Science Review* 70 (1973): 409-432.

16 Martin J. Wattenberg, *Is Voting for Young People?* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2008), p. 32.

17 Inference based on findings in Prior, *Post-Broadcast Democracy*, ch. 3.

18 Prior, *Post-Broadcast Democracy*, p. 83.

19 Thomas E. Patterson, "Young People and News," Report of the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Jul 2007, p. 22.

20 Thomas E. Patterson, "Doing Well and Doing Good," Report of the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, December 2000, p. 13.

21 Roberts, et al, "Kids and Media at the New Millennium."

were much less likely than those in a household without it to follow the news regularly after leaving home<sup>22</sup>.

The introduction of cable television marked a historic turning point. For 150 years the daily news audience had been expanding. The invention of the hand-cranked rotary press drove down the price of the newspaper from five cents to a penny in the 1830s, and newspaper readership immediately began to rise. By the end of the 1800s, helped along by the invention of newsprint and the steam-driven press, some metropolitan dailies were selling as many as 100,000 copies a day. Radio news came along in the 1920s, and television news followed in the 1950s. But as cable subscriptions rose in the 1980s, the news audience began to shrink.

To be sure, some citizens get more news now than was possible in earlier times. Twenty-four hour cable news and on-demand Internet news are readily available to the interested citizen. Some Americans take advantage of the opportunity. They follow what's happening in Congress and on the campaign trail, are attentive to what's going on at the White House and in Beijing, are interested in what's being said about illegal immigration and offshore drilling. Yet they are a minority, and their number is diminishing.

The same media system that provides a rich array of news content also brings an inexhaustible supply of sitcoms, movies, sports events, reality shows, electronic games. Media abundance not only allows us to choose, it forces us to choose. We learn, as Todd Gitlin says, "not only to see, but not to see – to tune out."<sup>23</sup> Increasing numbers of Americans have tuned out the news, particularly those who are under 40 years of age – the cable generation. In the 1970s, young adults were nearly as likely as older adults to watch television news on a daily basis; their newspaper reading habits were also not all that different from those of older adults<sup>24</sup>. The pattern today is much different. A fourth of young adults pay virtually no attention to news while another fourth pay occasional attention at best. Less than one in five pays close attention, which is less than half the level of older adults<sup>25</sup>.

But the flight from news is not merely a story of the young. At all age levels, the typical adult today spends less time on news than even a decade or two ago<sup>26</sup>. Americans are not walled off from the news because of its high cost or inaccessibility. They suffer from insufficient interest.

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22 Patterson, "Doing Well and Doing Good," p. 13.

23 Todd Gitlin, *Media Unlimited: How the Media Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms Our Lives* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), p. 119.

24 Wattenberg, *Is Voting for Young People?* p. 32.

25 Patterson, "Young People and News," pp. 12-14.

26 Pew Research Center for the People and the Press report, "Key News Audiences Now Blend Online and Traditional Sources," August 17, 2008.

The news, as Lippmann noted, cannot by itself create an informed public<sup>27</sup>. But there is no substitute for it. The news is the people's everyday window onto the world of politics beyond their direct experience. A less attentive public is a less knowledgeable public. What the public does not know can reach astonishing heights. A 2010 Pew Research Center survey, for instance, explored Americans' awareness of the process surrounding the health care reform bill then under consideration in Congress. The legislation had been headline news for months and had been stalled for much of that period by the Senate requirement of sixty votes to break a filibuster and bring the bill to the Senate floor for a vote. When asked how many votes were needed to break a Senate filibuster – whether it was 51, 60, 67, or 75 – only 26 percent of the respondents picked the correct response – about the same percentage as would be expected if they had simply guessed at the right answer. When asked whether the Senate majority leader was Harry Reid, Al Franken, Mitch McConnell, or Hillary Clinton, only 39 percent made the correct pick. A larger number, 44 percent, said they did not know who held the post. Ten percent guessed it was Hillary Clinton, the secretary of state<sup>28</sup>.

Young adults are especially uninformed about current events. Four decades ago, young adults were nearly as well informed as older ones<sup>29</sup>. With the spread of cable television in the 1980s, their information level began to recede and has since fallen sharply. In the 2004 National Election Survey (NES) survey, for example, adults under 30 could correctly answer only a third of the factual questions, as compared with half for older adults. Young adults scored lower than all other age groups on every NES question, whether it was identification of current political leaders, awareness of which party controlled Congress, or basic facts about government<sup>30</sup>.

In the Pew survey conducted at the height of the health care debate, most young adults might as well have been living on Mars for all that they knew about Congress. Among 18–29 year olds, only one in seven said it takes sixty votes to break a Senate filibuster, and only one in six named the Senate majority leader. Even then, some of them were only guessing<sup>31</sup>.

The Internet, despite what its boosters claim<sup>32</sup>, cannot correct the problem. Thousands of sites are available to us, but we visit relatively few, and we do so selectively. Citizens

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27 Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, p. 17.

28 Pew Research Center poll, February 2010.

29 Wattenberg, *Is Voting for Young People?* p. 32

30 *Ibid.*

31 Both of the Pew survey questions provided four alternatives, one of which was the correct answer. Estimating from the average number who picked one of the three incorrect answers, it is likely that, among the 18-29 year-old respondents, no more than one in ten actually knew the filibuster number and no more than one in eight actually knew the identity of the Senate majority leader.

32 See, for example, *Get Ready: The Millennials Are Coming!* Forrester Research Report, 2005.

without much interest in news rarely visit news sites and, when they do, normally stick around for only a brief time<sup>33</sup>.

The Internet's capacity to foster a daily news habit is likewise limited. Television encouraged a news habit by requiring viewers to be in front of their sets for a half hour at the appointed time each day. Newspapers did it through a morning ritual – the almost unthinking walk to the door to retrieve the paper. Online news use is less fixed by time, place, and routine – the ingredients that go into the making of a habit<sup>34</sup>. For the first time in the history of polling, a majority of Americans now say they dip into the news from time to time during the day, rather than getting it at a regular time<sup>35</sup>.

Those who rhapsodize about the "information age" ignore the human factor. Although public affairs information is more readily available than ever before, the key aspect, as it has always been, is the demand for it. Unless we are persuaded that the news is worth our time, its round-the-clock availability is largely irrelevant. Through the media, we aim primarily to be entertained, pacified, excited, connected, gratified, relieved of boredom. "Our prevailing business," sociologist Todd Gitlin writes, "is the business not of information but of satisfaction, the feeling of feelings, to which we give as much time as we can manage, not only at home but in the car, at work, or walking down the street."<sup>36</sup>

A consequence is that the knowledge gap between the more informed and the less informed is expanding. In today's high-choice media environment, the less informed opt for entertainment programming while the more informed include the news junkies. The result, Marcus Prior writes, is "growing inequality of information."<sup>37</sup> Citizens are also becoming more balkanized, separated as much by what they know and don't know, as by their physical appearance and where they reside. We live increasingly, as Joseph Turow expresses it, in "electronic equivalents of gated communities."<sup>38</sup> Some Americans know a great deal about computer gaming. Others are steeped in music. Still others are on familiar terms with the characters in television's sitcoms. And some are versed in public affairs, although fewer than in the pre-cable era.

### Speed and snippets

"The citizen performs the perilous business of government under the worst possible

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33 Patterson, "Young People and News," p. 11.

34 Marie E-Len Rios and Clyde H. Bentley, "Use of Online News Sites: Development of Habit and Automatic Procedural Processing," paper presented at the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication annual convention, August 2001, Washington, DC

35 Pew Research Center poll, August 2008.

36 Gitlin, *Media Unlimited*, pp. 5-6.

37 Prior, *Post-Broadcast Democracy*, p. 288.

38 Joseph Turow, *Breaking Up America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 2.

conditions.<sup>39</sup> Walter Lippmann wrote those words in 1922, a time when deafening factories, oversized families, and unending household chores sapped people's time and attention. A quiet moment with the evening paper was as close as many people came to a civic education. "For the newspaper in all literalness is the bible of democracy, the book out of which a people determines its conduct," Lippmann said. "It is the only serious book that most people read. It is the only book they read every day."<sup>40</sup>

Life is much easier today but we do not as a result give more thought to politics. We might even think less about it. The same instrument – the media – that in Lippmann's time was a refuge from the madness of everyday life has become a leading source of it.

Americans spend roughly six hours a day on average attending to media, an activity that takes up more of their time than everything but sleeping. So powerful is the lure of the media that we increasingly juggle them. As we watch TV, we surf the web, play a computer game, text our friends. "Media multitasking" has more than doubled over the past two decades, enabling the typical American to cram two or more additional hours of media content into the six hours a day spent with media<sup>41</sup>.

The flow of messages during these hours has accelerated, sometimes by our own hand, sometimes by the design of others. Tweets substitute for email, messaging for phone calls, singles for albums, 10- and 15-second ads for those of 30 and 60 seconds. The news is no exception. The average "sound bite" – a block of uninterrupted speech by a newsmaker on television news – was more than 40 seconds in the 1960s<sup>42</sup>. Sound bites now average less than 10 seconds in length<sup>43</sup>. Even that pace is not fast enough for some viewers. In the past decade, there has been a doubling of the number of viewers – now a majority – who watch television news while clicking between it and other programming<sup>44</sup>.

Speed increases sensation but decreases learning. There is, as Maggie Jackson notes, "a fine line . . . between abundance and chaos."<sup>45</sup> We have, partly out of self-defense, mastered the art of exposing ourselves to messages without giving them our attention. If we paid heed to each of the hundreds of messages that fly past us each day – the stanzas, the sound bites, the tweets, the calls, the commercials, the scenes, the crawls – we would drive ourselves nuts. As we have steeped ourselves ever more deeply in media, our

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39 Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, p. 73.

40 Walter Lippmann, *Liberty and the News* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Howe, 1920), p. 47.

41 Debra W. Haffner, *What Every 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Parent Needs to Know* (New York: Newmarket Press, 2008), p. 148.

42 Daniel R. Hallin, "Sound Bite News," *Journal of Communication* 42 (1992): 5-24; Kiku Adatto, "Sound Bite Democracy," Research Paper R-2, Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, June 1990.

43 Center for Media and Public Affairs data, 2008.

44 Pew Research Center trend data.

45 Maggie Jackson, *Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2008, 37).

concentration level has plummeted. A 2007 study revealed that, compared with a decade earlier, the typical individual's attention span had declined by half<sup>46</sup>. For reasons not totally understood, the digital world prompts us to go faster. About 60 percent of those who read the regular daily newspaper spend at least a half hour on its pages. Only about 40 percent of those who read an online daily newspaper do so<sup>47</sup>.

A hard-to-admit truth about media abundance is that it reduces our ability to digest information. "What information consumes is rather obvious," Nobel laureate Herbert Simon writes, "It consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention."<sup>48</sup> As attention shrinks, our ability to figure out what goes with what or to remember facts erodes. Unless something shrieks for our attention, it is a blip in an hours-long flow of daily messages. Is there anyone in America who has not heard, many times over, the names of at least some of the justices on the Supreme Court? Why then are two-thirds of Americans unable to recall the name of even a single justice<sup>49</sup>?

When saturated with messages, what we already know largely determines what we will learn, as UCLA's John Zaller has shown<sup>50</sup>. To those who are uninformed, John Roberts might as well be John Doe: their minds fail to perk up when Roberts is mentioned in the news. Stored information acts as a trigger, which is why, when we are aware of something, news about it can catch our attention. Otherwise the message glides past, making no more of a lasting impression than the telephone posts we pass while traveling down a busy highway.

Media multitasking contributes to the "more is less" effect. The "divided mind" is a less absorbent mind, as well as a diminished mind. MIT psychologist Sherry Turkle has found that people do each thing less well when they multitask, which also inhibits cognitive memory and learning<sup>51</sup>. People have difficulty enough recalling stand-alone news stories minutes after exposure but, when a story is accompanied by a scroll on the bottom of the screen touting a different topic, the memory loss quickens<sup>52</sup>.

Reading is one of the few media activities that compels our attention and sometimes evokes thought, but we now read less and do so for a shorter span<sup>53</sup>. Television, except

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46 The survey was conducted by behavioral psychologists and commissioned by Lloyds TSB Insurance for purposes of determining marketing strategies.

47 "Key News Audiences Now Blend Online and Traditional Sources," *Report of the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press*, August 17, 2008.

48 Herbert A. Simon, "Designing Organizations for an Information-Rich World", in Martin Greenberger, *Computers, Communication, and the Public Interest* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), pp. 40-41.

49 FindLaw.com survey, June 2010.

50 John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 274.

51 Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

52 Mlckie Edwardson, Kurt Kent, Maeve McConnell, "Television News Information Gain: Videotext Versus a Talking Head," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 29 (1985): 367-385.

53 Mark Bauerlein, *The Dumbest Generation* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 45.

in its infancy, never required much concentration. A study found that most viewers in the 1970s paid only sporadic attention to the news stories, to the point where soon after the newscast they could recall less than a fifth of the stories<sup>54</sup>. Even that level of attention might be hard to sustain today. Faced with what Gitlin describes as "the perpetually vanishing present streaking by,<sup>55</sup>" we cope by tuning out while appearing to be tuned in.

In the slower age of the 1950s, the cyberneticist Karl Deutsch warned that "noise" from surrounding messages was impeding and distorting the reception of intended messages<sup>56</sup>. We are, today, inundated with "noise." Small wonder that we regularly connect things that are unconnected, complicate things that are simple, simplify things that are complex. We would know, if we were paying attention, that climate change and weather are not synonymous and have different indicators. Yet we insist on conflating them, which is why respondents are more likely to deny the existence of global warming when polled in colder months<sup>57</sup>.

Of course we have always engaged in such reasoning. The world is far too complex to be grasped without shortcuts and gut feelings<sup>58</sup>. But it is harder to construct a sensible image of the world when messages flow in rapid succession and the time for reflection is limited. The media torrent provides a vast theater for the imagination, one that is chaotic and varied enough to support any number of half-baked opinions.

## News as entertainment

What we have done to ourselves – our flight from news and from reflection – is matched by what news organizations have done to us. They have devised a style of news that is designed more to attract an audience than to inform it.

As cable spread into American homes in the 1980s and 1990s, traditional news outlets lost audience at a steady pace – 3 percent a year for broadcast news and 1 percent a year for daily newspapers. As the losses mounted, many media outlets opted for a market-driven style of news designed to compete with cable entertainment programs. Critics called it "infotainment" and "news lite." Within the news business, it was commonly called soft news to distinguish it from traditional hard news (breaking events involving top

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54 John Stauffer, Richard Frost, and William Rybolt, "The Attention Factor in Recalling Network Television News," *Journal of Communication* 33 (1983): 29-37.

55 Gitlin, *Media Unlimited*, p. 20.

56 Karl W. Deutsch, "Communication Theory and Social Science," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 22 (1952): 469-483.

57 Lee Dye, "Global Warming and the Polls," ABC News/Technology, June 16, 2010. Web release.

58 Samuel Popkin, *The Reasoning Voter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Paul M. Sniderman, Richard A. Brody, and Philip E. Tetlock, *Reasoning and Choice: Explorations in Political Psychology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Arthur Lupia, "Shortcuts Versus Encyclopedias: Information and Voting Behavior in California Insurance Reform Elections." *American Political Science Review* 88(19941): 63-76.

leaders, major issues, or significant disruptions to daily routines). Former CBS anchor Walter Cronkite derided soft news as a "blot" on journalism<sup>59</sup>. NBC's Tom Brokaw defended it, saying that news organizations could not "commit suicide" in the face of changing audience preferences<sup>60</sup>.

Whatever the justification, the news is less meaty than it once was. A study of print and network news by Harvard University's Shorenstein Center found that celebrity profiles, lifestyle scenes, hard-luck stories, good-luck tales, and other human interest stories have doubled as a proportion of news content. Stories about dramatic incidents – crimes and disasters – have also doubled. The number of news stories with a sensational element has nearly doubled<sup>61</sup>.

It is at the local level, however, where soft news is king. A 2005 study of 50 local TV stations found that crime, accidents, and mayhem accounted for half of all news stories and three-fourths of lead stories. An additional fourth of the stories were on human interest subjects, such as pop culture. Only a fourth of the stories dealt with civic affairs. A "hook and hold" marketing strategy was at work. Local newcasts would lead with a sensational story – in some cases three in a row without commercial interruption – in order to "hook" the viewer. Teasers are then introduced that tell of soft-news stories scheduled for the end in the newscast with the aim of "holding" the viewer. Civic affairs stories were sandwiched in the middle. Such stories were also downgraded by length. They were shorter on average than the crime and accident stories; in fact, two out of five were reported in less than 30 seconds<sup>62</sup>.

City hall was once a regular beat for TV reporters. Barely any of the nation's 1000-plus local stations now assign a reporter to city hall. As for congressional elections, they might as well be happening elsewhere for the amount of attention they get. A study of California's local stations found that they averaged roughly a single story each on the local congressional races during an entire campaign period<sup>63</sup>. A study of Midwestern television news found that, if viewers were to learn anything about local congressional races, they would have to pay attention to the paid candidate ads shown during the newscasts. The local stations seldom reported an election story<sup>64</sup>.

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59 Quoted in James McCartney, "News Lite," *American Journalism Review*, June 1997, 21.

60 Statement made at a Kennedy School Forum, Harvard University, May 9, 1997.

61 Patterson, "Doing Well and Doing Good," pp. 3-5.

62 Walter C. Dean and Atiba Pertilla, "I-Teams and 'Eye Candy': The Reality of Local TV News," in Tom Rosensteil, Marion Just, Todd Belt, Atiba Pertilla, Walter Dean, and Dante Chinni, *We Interrupt This Newscast* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 31-35.

63 Center for Media and Public Affairs data, 1998.

64 University of Wisconsin News Lab, "Midwest Local TV Newscasts Devote 2.5 Times As Much Air Time To Political Ads As Election Coverage, Study Finds," *Midwest News Analysis Index*, November 21, 2006.

If television news is the extreme case, few of the nation's newspapers are an exception to the trend. Although newspapers do not display soft news as prominently or as frequently as do television newscasts, the trend is the same<sup>65</sup>.

There is, of course, nothing wholly novel in soft news. The heartwarming and the macabre have been part of the mix nearly since the beginning of newspapers. What is different today is the scale and mindlessness of it all. Lindsay Lohan — a B-actress by any accounting — receives a level of press attention that would be the envy of a cabinet secretary. Not surprisingly, Lohan's name recognition exceeds that of all cabinet members except Hillary Clinton<sup>66</sup>.

Scholars have not tried to determine the full effect of the decline in public affairs coverage on public knowledge, and any such effort might falter because of the complexity of the task. But nearly every study that has taken a partial look at the question has reached the same conclusion. Soft news blunts learning about public affairs<sup>67</sup>, while also fostering misunderstandings. Viewers of local newscasts that play up crime, for example, have an exaggerated sense of the dangers lurking in their community<sup>68</sup>.

News content affects not only what people will come to know and not know, but also what's uppermost in their minds. "The power of the press is a primordial one," Theodore H. White observed. "It determines what people will think and talk about."<sup>69</sup> In a 2007 Shorenstein Center survey that stretched over three weeks, respondents were told of a particular story from the past day and asked whether they had heard of it. Second on the recall list was the death of the starlet Anna Nicole Smith, which broke on February 8. Far more respondents knew of Smith's death than knew, for example, about Britain's announcement of a planned troop withdrawal from Iraq (February 21) or the 400-point plunge in the U.S. stock market in reaction to a near 10 percent drop in China's stock market (February 27). Americans' preoccupation with Smith's death was undoubtedly due to several factors, but news coverage was driving it. Smith's death got more media attention than all other developments during the survey period, save for the mountain-top rescue of three climbers and their dog (February 19), which topped the list as the most recalled story of the period<sup>70</sup>.

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65 Patterson, *Doing Well and Doing Good*, p. 5.

66 E-Poll, 2010.

67 Prior, *Post-Broadcast Democracy*, pp. 277-281.

68 Daniel Romer, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, and Sean Aday, "Television News and the Cultivation of Fear of Crime," *Journal of Communication* 53 (2003): 88-104.

69 Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President*, 1972 (New York: Bantam Books, 1973), p. 327.

70 Patterson, "Young People and News," p. 16.

## Conflict and spin

Soft news was the brainchild of marketing departments, sometimes over the objections of those in the newsroom. But journalists have also redefined the news. They have turned political reporting into a two-ring circus.

Vietnam and Watergate were turning points, altering not only the relationship between the journalist and the politician, but also the way in which news stories are constructed. The lies and deceptions of the Johnson and Nixon Administrations convinced journalists that politicians could not be taken at their word. The *Washington Post's* Watergate investigation, which helped bring down the Nixon presidency, convinced them that aggressive reporting was required.

But how can the journalist act aggressively in the context of the humdrum of everyday public affairs? Wrongdoing on the scale of Watergate is exceedingly rare, and investigative journalism in any case is slow and painstaking. It is no simple matter to uncover a politician's true motives or to verify rumors of wrongdoing. Even if the effort is made, the truth may be so fragile, the trail so cold, or the misconduct so trivial that, in the end, there is no story to tell.

It was not long, however, before reporters had created an everyday alternative to investigative journalism. When a politician did something newsworthy, they turned to his adversaries to tear it or him down<sup>71</sup>. The critical element was supplied not by painstaking exploration of whether a politician was sincere or a proposal was sound, but by inserting a contrary opinion. "They're not interested in clarity," a U.S. senator complained. "They're interested in confusion and controversy."<sup>72</sup>

News had been descriptive – an account of what newsmakers had said or done. The new model was synthetic. The journalist's intervention – the sought-out opinion from an opposing voice and the insertion of it in the story – was what fostered the impression that an actual debate between the two sides had taken place. It was also a type of reporting that enabled journalists to become critics in their own right. Television news stories in the 1960s often did not include a wrap-up comment by the reporter. By the late 1970s, all of them had a wrap<sup>73</sup>, typically in the form of a barb<sup>74</sup>. Reporters were ten times more likely to close a story with an opinion than with a fact<sup>75</sup>.

By the 1980s, politicians had become eager participants in the process. Race, abortion, and a host of other social issues had demolished the old division between the political par-

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71 Thomas E. Patterson, *The Vanishing Voter* (New York: Knopf, 2002), p. 71.

72 Quoted in David Shaw, "Beyond Skepticism: Have the Media Crossed the Line into Cynicism," *Los Angeles Times*, April 17, 1996 A1.

73 Hallin, "Sound Bite News," p. 10.

74 Michael Robinson and Margaret Sheehan, *Over the Wire and on TV* (New York: Sage Foundation, 1983), 226.

75 Catherine A. Steele and Kevin G. Barnhurst, "The Journalism of Opinion," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 13 (1996): 198.

ties. As the South moved out of the Democratic column and into the Republican fold, liberal GOP lawmakers began to disappear along with conservative southern Democrats. As Republican lawmakers became more like each other and less like their Democratic counterparts, the policy differences between the two parties widened. Bipartisanship weakened, replaced by antagonisms reinforced by the uncompromising single-issue groups that had formed on the right and the left. Overheated rhetoric, once the signature of congressional oddballs, became routine. "Warfare among elites, waged... in the name of causes, not compromises," is how Harvard's Richard Neustadt described the change<sup>76</sup>.

Politicians had also become more sophisticated in their communication strategies. The art of public relations, which was perfected in their commercial realm, had worked its way into politics. No speech was complete without a pithy sound bite, no legislative bill was introduced without a compelling title, no campaign – whether for election or to pass or block legislation – was conducted without a messaging strategy. What politicians had done for centuries on the basis of instinct was now being done on the basis of theory and technique.

The political reality was manipulative enough but the news exaggerated it. An election study found that journalists routinely ignored candidates' policy proposals, which consumed the bulk of their speeches, choosing instead to highlight the moments when candidates went on the attack<sup>77</sup>. The conflict rule applied also to coverage of political advertising. Candidates were increasingly resorting to negative ads, although not yet to the point where they accounted for most of the ad messages. Yet news stories about political ads centered overwhelmingly on the negative ones<sup>78</sup>.

By the 1990s, the pattern was firmly in place. Journalists supplied the platform while politicians supplied the sound bites. Conflict, always an element of news coverage, became the refrain<sup>79</sup>.

This type of journalism might well attract an audience. A good fight draws a crowd. But however much conflict-oriented stories serve the interests of journalists and politicians, it does not serve the public's information needs. It is "he said, she said" journalism of the worst kind. A statement on the problem of global warming is accompanied by one dismissing it. A sound bit on the problem of health care policy is accompanied by one praising it. A claim about progress in the conflict in Afghanistan is accompanied by one denigrating the progress. Journalists are careful to avoid taking sides on the issues, for that could lead the

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76 Quoted in Steven E. Schier, *By Invitation Only: The Rise of Exclusive Politics in the United States* (Pittsburgh, Penn.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), p. 5.

77 Patterson, *Vanishing Voter*, p. 75. See also, Erik P. Bucy and Maria Elizabeth Grabe, "Taking Television Seriously: A Sound and Image Bite Analysis of Presidential Campaign Coverage, 1992-2004," *Journal of Communication* 57 (2007): 652-675.

78 Patterson, *Vanishing Voter*, p. 75.

79 See Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein, eds., *Congress, the Press, and the Public* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute and Brookings Institution, 1994), pp. 59-129.

charge of partisan bias. There is no context or resolution, only conflict. In fact, the conflict frame privileges opposition claims – attacks on the opposing party are more prevalent than that party's defense of its positions<sup>80</sup>.

Research indicates that citizens respond to this brand of "objective" reporting by accepting whichever argument, or whichever side, is most compatible with their partisanship, values, or interests. The ambiguity in reports that pit one side against the other allows bias to rein<sup>81</sup>. The "will to believe" trumps the relative merit of the competing claims. People choose claims that coincide with their existing preferences while rejecting those that contradict them<sup>82</sup>. A study of news coverage of the financial stability of social security, for instance, found that misleading statements increased the number of people that falsely believed the program was about to "run out of money completely."<sup>83</sup>

At that, the news is likely not the public's major source of misinformation. That distinction likely rests with the radio and television talk shows that have proliferated with the growth of cable and the elimination of the Fairness Doctrine. The latter development occurred in 1987 when the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) concluded that the expansion of cable television and FM radio alleviated the "scarcity problem" that earlier had led the FCC to require broadcast licensees to cover "vitaly important controversial issues" and "to afford reasonable opportunity for the discussion of conflicting views of public importance." Stations had been required to air a liberal or conservative talk show if they carried one of the opposing stripe. Freed of the constraint, scores of stations switched to a talk-show format.

Within a few years, the most popular of the programs, *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, had a weekly audience of 20 million listeners, most of them conservatives<sup>84</sup>. Limbaugh's success encouraged imitators on radio and contributed to Rupert Murdoch's decision in 1996 to launch Fox News as a conservative alternative to traditional TV outlets. By 2000, its regular audience had surpassed that of CNN, prompting other cable networks to install partisan or hard-edged talk-show hosts.

Not since the "yellow journalism" era of the early 1900s have Americans been so heavily

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80 James Stimson, *Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 16.

81 Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler, "When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions," *Political Behavior* 32 (2010): 303-350.

82 Charles S. Taber and Milton Lodge, "Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs." *American Journal of Political Science* 50 (2006): 755-769; Kari Edwards and Edward E. Smith, "A Disconfirmation Bias in the Evaluation of Arguments." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 71(1996): 5-24

83 Jennifer Jerit and Jason Barabas, "Bankrupt Rhetoric: How Misleading Information Affects Knowledge About Social Security," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 70 (2006): 278-303.

84 Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph N. Cappella, *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 93-96.

exposed to as much misinformation as is visited upon them through today's talk show hosts. The examples are so numerous – they are a daily occurrence – that a single illustration will suffice. On July 16, 2009, Betsy McCaughey, former lieutenant governor of New York, claimed on a talk show that the health care reform bill under debate in Congress "would make it mandatory – absolutely require – that every five years people in Medicare have a required counseling session that will tell them how to end their life sooner." That appearance led to a guest slot on another talk show where McCaughey talked about "death panels." From there, the claim echoed throughout the right-wing talk circuit. Fox News's Glenn Beck claimed that the legislation was part of a broader assault on life. "Sometimes for the common good," Beck said, mockingly, "you just have to say, 'Hey, Grandpa, you've had a good life'".

Once held, misinformation is hard to root out. When people don't know something, they can sometimes be persuaded to learn about it<sup>85</sup>. But when they hold false beliefs, they often fight efforts to inform their thinking<sup>86</sup>. Psychological research indicates that the misinformed tend to shed the corrective information while retaining the original belief, sometimes by embracing it more zealously<sup>87</sup>. As Brendan Nyhan has shown, those who are wrong in their facts about an issue are often more likely than those who know the facts to think they have command of the issue<sup>88</sup>.

Lippmann put the problem plainly. Noting the stubbornness with which citizens hold onto their perceptions, he saw little room for informed persuasion. "While men are willing to admit that there are two sides to a question," he wrote, "they do not believe that there are two sides to what they regard as fact."<sup>89</sup>

## The echo chamber

V.O. Key described the impact of communication on public opinion in metaphorical terms: "The output of an echo chamber bears an inevitable and invariable relation to the input." It should occasion no surprise that as the messages about public affairs have become increasingly warped, twisted, truncated, and refracted, that the public would know less

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85 Martin Gilens, "Political Ignorance and Collective Policy Preferences." *American Political Science Review* 95 (2001): 379-396.

86 Taber and Lodge, "Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs," 755-769. Edwards and Smith, "A Disconfirmation Bias in the Evaluation of Arguments." 5-24.

87 Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler, "When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperception," *Political Behavior* 32 (2010): 303-330.

88 Nyhan, Brendan, "Why the "Death Panel" Myth Wouldn't Die: Misinformation in the Health Care Reform Debate," *The Forum* 8 (2010). Web journal.

89 Quoted in Patterson, *The Vanishing Voter*, p. 60.

and misunderstand more about public affairs.

Citizens depend on the media to stay abreast of what they cannot see with their own eyes. If they do not pay attention to news, they will be uninformed about public affairs. If they pay attention to unreliable sources, they will concoct wacky versions of reality.

What are citizens to do? Cast as onlookers to a world they cannot see for themselves, and yet asked to judge what is going on there, they are, to an uncomfortable degree, at the mercy of those who craft the messages. They can be faulted for their lack of interest, for their willingness to grasp at thin portrayals, for their laziness in not trying to resolve contradictions in what they are seeing and hearing. Ultimately, though, the responsibility rests primarily with those who are providing the information, who are protected constitutionally because of society's need for reliable information about public affairs. When they neglect their duty, everyone loses in the long run, as the late James Carey so pointedly said:

*Journalism and democracy share a common fate. Without the institutions and spirit of democracy, journalists are reduced to propagandists or entertainers. When journalists measure their success solely by the size of their readership or audience, by the profits of their companies, or by their incomes, status, and visibility, they have caved into the temptation of false gods, of selling their heritage for a potage...*<sup>90</sup>

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90 James Carey, "Lawyers, Voyeurs, and Vigilantes," *Media Studies Journal* Spring/Summer 1999, pp. 16-17.