CHAPTER 1

Mediated Politics: An Introduction

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Mediated political communication has become central to politics and public life in contemporary democracies. Traditional features of politics persist, from old-fashioned door-to-door campaigning to party and social movement organizing. And people still engage in direct, unmediated political discussion with one another. However, many polities have reached a point where governance, along with a host of related processes such as opinion formation, could not occur in their present forms without various uses of media. Hence the title of this book.

Many of the political changes that ushered in the twenty-first century, from the declining importance of nationalism in most post-industrial democracies, to the shifting patterns of participation within them, are typically linked to media processes, either as causes or as adaptive mechanisms. While some aspects of civic life such as voting, party identification, and national sentiments have eroded in many nations, other activities such as joining causes, protesting unpopular policies, and forming new regional and global communities appear to be on the rise (Inglehart 1997; Archibugi, Held, and Kohler 1998). Political and academic debates question whether changing patterns of participation and identification pose alarming threats to the legitimacy of democratic governments, or whether they are simply routine, even liberating, adjustments to new global social and economic conditions (Bennett 1998; Pool 1990; Putnam 1993, 1995; Rahn and Transue 1998). Answering the core questions about citizen experience in the democratic process increasingly requires understanding the centrality of mediated political communication both in the governing process and in citizen perceptions of society and its problems.

W. Lance Bennett and Robert M. Entman

DEMOCRACY AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

The overarching purpose of this book is to explore how communication media affect the exchanges of information through which people decide how to think and act in politics. We accept a broad definition of politics as the "authoritative allocation of values" in society. Authority in this definition refers to the linkages between citizens and government through which power is conferred willingly by, or taken forcibly from, people to make decisions that regulate the flow of goods, services, health benefits, physical safety, and other values in society. It is clear in all democracies that personal power is not equal in matters of governance. Access to communication is one of the key measures of power and equality in modern democracies. People communicate both to make their values and interests (preferences) known, and to learn about the status of government activities affecting those preferences. Communication can shape power and participation in society in negative ways, by obscuring the motives and interests behind political decisions, or in positive ways, by promoting the involvement of citizens in those decisions.

People often understand when they are being deceived or excluded from aspects of government; the nature of communication in public life thus affects how people feel about politics and whether they feel that government legitimately represents them (Cappella and Jamieson 1997). As a result, the legitimacy of political authority has come under question as citizens in many nations view their elected authorities with increasing skepticism and suspicion. It is important to understand the degree to which the communication linkages among individuals, and between individuals and their governors, provide for information, interest formation, and representation that is agreeable and satisfying. To this end, we adopt two broad concepts through which to explore communication's impact on politics and government: the public sphere and the policy sphere.

Public Sphere

Put simply, the public sphere refers to the areas of informal public life – from cafes, to Internet chat rooms, to the exchange of opinion in magazines and television talk programs – where citizens can go to explore social interests and conflicts. In this sphere, individuals have the freedom to judge the quality of their governmental decisions independently of censorship. The public sphere is comprised of *any and all loca-*

Introduction

tions, physical or virtual, where ideas and feelings relevant to politics are transmitted or exchanged openly. We recognize that these definitions could encompass an e-mail exchange between two friends about whether, say, men are genetically sexist; a magazine article that discusses the high rate of fathering illegitimate children among professional athletes; and a television program that shows persistent, ostensibly comic misunderstandings between men and women who share a bathroom at a law firm. The definitional inclusiveness is intentional. One of the hallmarks of the emerging culture, boosted no doubt by the profusion of communication channels, is the permeability of boundaries separating the political from the nonpolitical and the private sphere from the public sphere. This book explores *transformations in politics and the public sphere that arise from the changing operations of new and old communication technologies.*

The idea of public sphere comes from the work of Jürgen Habermas (1989). In the ideal public sphere, all citizens have equal access to communication that is both independent of government constraint, and through its deliberative, consensus-building capacity, constrains the agendas and decisions of government in turn. Of course, this ideal has never been achieved, and it probably never will. As all students of politics understand, the liberation of governmental power from interest formations that exclude others (and, thereby, create permanent inequalities) is the fundamental, perhaps defining, challenge of democracy. Yet the public sphere serves theorists well as an ideal type – that is, as a construct against which different real-world approximations can be evaluated.

The Policy Sphere

While it is important to recognize how people engage with and communicate their personal politics to others, often at some remove from government, it is equally important to assess the degree to which public deliberation – and whose deliberation – finds its way into the decisions of the state. In other words, we believe it important to recognize the distinction between politics as it occurs between citizens and governing institutions like legislatures or courts, and politics as it concerns power and values in informal social relationships. Discussions of matters seemingly remote from politics, such as food preferences or sports teams, may have political dimensions by our definition (e.g., Is it wrong to eat meat? Do professional athletes or owners make too much money, and should we boycott games when ticket prices get too high?). But even

3

W. Lance Bennett and Robert M. Entman

if the personal is (often) the political, it remains important to distinguish such exchanges from political discussions that directly address government policies. Therefore, we advance a second, finer distinction: between the public sphere and the policy sphere. The policy sphere is that subset of public sphere where ideas and feelings explicitly connect with – are communicated to, from, or about – government officials, parties, or candidates for office who may decide the outcomes of issues and conflicts facing society. None of the three earlier examples of public sphere discussions about gender and social behavior occur within the policy sphere. However, a radio documentary that investigated the effectiveness of "deadbeat parent" programs (i.e., government policies) designed to make absent parents maintain child support payments would embody a contribution to the policy sphere in the same general area.

If citizens are increasingly withdrawing into specialized communities or audience segments to pursue individual interests, as some of our contributors suggest, they may be practicing a species of politics and participating in a kind of public sphere. But we should not equate an Internet chat on which rifle does the best when hunting for deer with one about which candidate would do best as president or prime minister. There will always be citizens active in the policy sphere, and these political activists are the ones who will most affect how much everyone else in the society pays for taxes, gasoline, health care, and much else – including rifles and hunting licenses. Some of these activists may well applaud the withdrawal of masses from political engagement, as presumably a contracted policy sphere is easier to control. But at some point, if it shrivels enough, the policy sphere could become thoroughly unrepresentative, and the government undemocratic.

Many of the authors in this volume are concerned that important areas of the policy sphere lie beyond the grasp or interest of many citizens due to strategic communication that targets selected audiences and excludes others. A second, less direct but equally powerful force that discourages participation in the policy sphere is the commercialization of media in general and news organizations in particular. A broad survey of global media trends indicates that erosions of public media are accompanied by the crowding out of useful and compelling political content by commercial programming aimed at entertainment, lifestyle, and other consumer values (McChesney 1999). Without governments or other public regulatory entities to compel them, media corporations have little reason to embrace public service values.

4

The United States represents an advanced case of both these policy sphere trends: a relatively unregulated and highly commercialized media economy, and the application of enormously costly political communication technologies aimed at containing the scope and setting the terms of public involvement in many policy matters. In some areas, of course, there is lively and opinionated popular engagement. This pattern of engagement in the policy sphere exists largely on social policy matters that readily yield up emotional symbolism, such as welfare, abortion, and various civil rights issues. It is not coincidental that those issues often lead the nightly newscasts and find their way into the plots of movies and television entertainment programs, as noted in Gamson's chapter in this book. In other socially consequential areas such as the genetic engineering of food, or the rewriting of media and communications regulatory law, public engagement is dim, and news coverage is confined largely to science and business sections of elite newspapers. In the next section we suggest ways of understanding the unevenness of public involvement in the policy sphere that go beyond commonsense, individual-level accounts of publics as selectively apathetic, disinterested, or ignorant. Recognizing such explanations as post hoc or circular is a good start for building more systematic theories of political communication that illuminate democracy.

MEDIATED POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Mediated communication, from news programs to entertainment fare, serves important functions in the contemporary public sphere. It provides good or bad information, offers engaging or stupefying perspectives on social issues, stimulates conversations among friends or between strangers on trains, and offers a selection of political, scientific, and socially authoritative or dubious sources that audiences may accept or reject in thinking about social issues. Setting political communication within a broad definition of the public sphere encourages the broadest possible understanding of the ways in which communication affects politics and public life. Thinking about comparative differences in public spheres encourages scholars to take the production, content, distribution, and consumption of news, advertising, and other forms of publicity as important research topics in their own right. We believe that there is a tendency in some recent quantitative research to reduce political communication to an anemic relationship between abstracted

W. Lance Bennett and Robert M. Entman

message content and equally abstracted individual or aggregate responses.

Understanding the empirical relationships between mediated messages and political dispositions and behaviors is important, but it is also important to understand a number of other qualities of the larger political communication environment, including:

- The range or diversity of information and sources of information
- The frequency of various issues and themes
- The formats in which politically relevant information is presented, including the depth or detail of presentation, the employment of tabloid and entertainment styles, and the relative uses of narrative, analysis, and ideology
- The balance between broad social and narrow personal identity cues in message frames
- The ways in which members of the public engage with and communicate their reactions to political messages they have received from the media

In the case of news, for example, these political content patterns may vary according to the ownership of news organizations, the competition patterns among them, the professional norms that affect how journalists think about their reporting, and the ways in which audience's lifestyles and identifications affect patterns of information consumption. Understanding such constraints on news content can help explain the issue agendas that appear in the news, the ways in which issues are covered, and the kinds of signals to citizens about how they can use the information they are receiving. In the end, of course, we may return to the behavioral bottom line and ask how communication content shapes opinions and patterns of participation. However, given systemic factors surrounding the production, formatting, and distribution of political information, the interpretation of opinion or voting data makes problematic what some research takes as a given: how the political communication environment shapes both the information available and the ways ordinary people use it in thinking about politics.

In short, we seek to expand and bridge different ways of thinking about political communication in democratic societies. In the process, we hope to erase the arbitrary and unhelpful divide between theories of communication that are centered around how individuals process information and theories centered around the production and the qual-

Introduction

ities of the information that individuals are processing. Many scholars have focused on the degree to which individuals form independent and stable opinions in often noisy and politically manipulated information environments. From these perspectives, we gather that individuals often display remarkable degrees of stability in their judgments, and that this stability derives from information heuristics that simplify large, noisy volumes information (Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991; Page and Shapiro 1992; Lupia and McCubbins 1998). The important message from this research is that citizens often achieve impressive levels of rationality in their political thinking, despite being bombarded with strategic and often emotional political messages and despite the distractions of frequent media spectacles (see Zaller in Chap. 12).

This theoretical framing of the political communication process around individual (generally rational choice) models of information processing can also lead to an arbitrary distinction between political substance and media spectacle (Zaller 1998). This distinction may inflate individual rationality and independence in making substantive judgments, while discounting much political communication content as mere media spectacle and political hype. Scholars in this school tend to be critical of those who focus on how political information campaigns are assembled and implemented, and particularly critical of those who conclude that publics are often prisoners of poor information.

At the same time, those scholars who study the information processes that shape the news, create advertising messages, and target audiences often reply that on many important issues and policy questions, publics are prisoners of poor information. Many of the authors in this book, for example, note that large segments of the general population are strategically excluded in public information campaigns. Moreover, the messages aimed at targeted audiences are typically designed not to stimulate independent thinking by providing alternative understandings, but to draw out the audience's pretested, preexisting emotional concerns. Those who subscribe to this communication process orientation may concede that individuals are not necessarily duped by communication campaigns but admit that they are often excluded, seldom challenged, and unlikely to learn much in most policy processes.

Limiting our conception of political communication to either an individual-centered or an environment-centered perspective introduces serious biases into how we think about, and what we end up knowing about, democracy. For example, individual, opinion-centered

7

W. Lance Bennett and Robert M. Entman

approaches to political communication tend to study policy issues that are highly visible and frequently polled. It is our impression that even the bellwether surveys by the University of Michigan Center for Political Studies determine which issues will be asked about in a given election year based on the current, most widely publicized issues. This research practice makes sense given the limits on various environmental and communication variables that can be included in surveys, but it seriously constrains the usefulness of this *opinion-centered research* for building comparative democratic theory. For example, incorporating communication process perspectives makes it more likely that scholars – instead of (ironically) allowing themselves to be heavily influenced by media agendas – will explore the vast majority of public policy decisions that slip under the radar of media, polling, and public attention. Since the most publicized issues generate the most attention from pollsters, a common strategy of elites or interest groups is to dampen public awareness of many policy issues, restricting the sphere of conflict so they can better control outcomes (Schattschneider 1960).

In areas where efforts are made to actively discourage publicity, or where publicity efforts simply do not meet news values or commercial advertising prices, fewer polls are likely to be taken. Due to such selective variation in available data, researchers either end up with little information about opinion processes, or information that points to areas of ignorance and nonopinion. In addition, more salient and frequently polled issues are likely to have more psychologically independent and socially robust bases for judgment, making strategic communication efforts and various other news and media effects appear to be comparatively weak.

In short, abstracting individual characteristics, issues, and media content variables out of larger communication processes risks turning many communication effects into mere artifacts of available data. In addition, tracing communication patterns backward from the issues that are most highly polled also restricts our understanding of the dynamics of communication in the broader public sphere. For example, the public may find many opportunities for meaningful political engagement within the media spectacle of a government sex scandal, from issues of morality and sexual harassment to the exploration of class or gender based values (Lawrence, Bennett, and Hunt 1999). Yet these aspects of meaningful public engagement are easily overlooked if the issues in the scandal are reduced to partisan politics or leadership evaluations based on external economic conditions in society.

8

Introduction

Finally, from a broader communication process model of the public sphere, the claim that citizens are not dupes may be narrowly true at the same time that it misses much of the political picture in which substantial publics are simply not involved (Entman 1989). Perhaps most importantly, the empirical discovery that all of the people are not swayed by all of the political messages, all of the time, hardly establishes a high standard for democratic achievement. In short, putting the main focus of mediated political communication on opinion responses to message content variables misses many other important and measurable characteristics of political communication on which the quality of democracy depends.

POLITICS IN MEDIATED SOCIETIES: THE UNITED STATES IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

By the end of the twentieth century, virtually every country (democratic and otherwise) had seen a shift in the locus of influential political communication to the mass media. Even as the term *mass media* has become synonymous with collective communication experiences, we now witness the rise of competing channels and forms of information along with marketing technologies that shape specialized messages and target often narrow but strategically important audiences. This book explores the interactions between these communication systems and democratic politics with an eye toward citizen engagement, political values, and the quality of public life.

From cellular phones, to the Internet, to bigger screens and elaborate cable television systems to fill them up, citizens in many industrial nations spend increasing time and money on mediated communication services and products. Meanwhile, the nature of these communication products and services continues to undergo tectonic shifts. New communication and information technologies and increasing sophistication in the strategic use of traditional and new media have changed the ways people operate in both their public and private lives.

Although we focus primarily upon the United States, we bring explicitly comparative perspectives to this project, both to broaden its theoretical and empirical reach and to stimulate thinking about comparative frameworks for political communication. Comparative analysis is challenging for many reasons, not the least of which is that at some level of specificity, every nation, locality, institution, culture, and communication system is unique. At the other extreme, attempts to force general-

W. Lance Bennett and Robert M. Entman

izations for the sake of advancing contentious theories do not serve the cause of understanding political experience at the human level. We attempt in this volume to adopt a middle level theoretical approach to the democratic experience. This approach recognizes the United States as different from other democracies in important respects, including: the number and levels of governmental institutions, the unusual election and campaign financing procedures, and a media system unrivaled in its commercial basis and relative lack of government regulation. At the same time, the American case offers a rich basis for comparing the ways in which information is delivered to publics by various media and for evaluating the impact of such mediated communication on citizen values and consciousness, a sense of common purpose and identification, and engagement in political life. We also hope to stimulate comparative dialogue about the impact of market forces on media systems, the blurring of traditional boundaries between entertainment and news, and the political uses of new communication technologies. As noted in the next section, changes in markets, technologies, and political uses of media have swept the planet with breathtaking speed, transcending national and cultural boundaries, yet with effects in different nations that are as yet poorly understood. We offer a brief overview of commonly emerging aspects of democratic public spheres that merit greater empirical and theoretical attention.

MARKETS, TECHNOLOGIES, AND COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS

Fundamental changes in national and international communication systems began in the 1980s and accelerated for the rest of the century. Nations, such as Germany, Sweden, and England, with strong traditions of state regulation of communication systems have been affected by technological and policy developments that allow for *greater economic efficiency* in media markets of all kinds. Even the United States, already an extreme case of a free-market media system, has undergone an unprecedented period of mergers, deregulation, new channel creation, and equally important, something of a reformation in corporate and policy thinking about audiences, markets, and the social responsibility of the media. In the go-go business climate of the 1980s and 1990s, the government approved a dizzying array of mergers and combinations that created large media empires with diversified holdings in cable, broadcast, publishing, movies, and Internet services. A corresponding