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978-0-521-78976-9 - Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy

Edited by W. Lance Bennett and Robert M. Entman

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Mediated Politics

Mediated Politics explores the changing media environments in contemporary democracy: the Internet, the decline of network news and the daily newspaper; the growing tendency to treat election campaigns as competing product advertisements; and the blurring line between news and entertainment. By combining new developments in political communication with core questions about politics and policy, a distinguished roster of international scholars offers new perspectives and directions for further study.

Several broad questions emerge from the book: with ever-increasing media outlets creating more specialized segments, are audiences treated increasingly as consumers to be diverted rather than as citizens to be informed? Are there implications for a sense of community? Should media give people only what they want or also what they need to be good citizens?

These and other tensions created by the changing nature of political communication are covered in sections on the changing public sphere, shifts in the nature of political communication, the new shape of public opinion, transformations of political campaigns, and alterations in citizens' needs and involvement.

W. Lance Bennett is Professor of Political Science and Ruddick C. Lawrence Professor of Communications at the University of Washington.

Robert M. Entman is Professor of Communication and Head of the Department of Communication at North Carolina State University.

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COMMUNICATION, SOCIETY AND POLITICS

Editors

W. Lance Bennett, *University of Washington*

Robert M. Entman, *North Carolina State University*

Politics and relations among individuals in societies across the world are being transformed by new technologies for targeting individuals and by sophisticated methods for shaping personalized messages. The new technologies challenge boundaries of many kinds – between news, information, entertainment, and advertising; between media, with the arrival of the World Wide Web; and even between nations. *Communication, Society and Politics* probes the political and social impacts of these new communication systems in national, comparative, and global perspectives.

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For our fathers:
Walt Bennett and Bernie Entman

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Preface

The study of political communication has reached a new level of maturity. Just as the field has attained recognition as a vital area of inquiry, however, the focus of its core concern, mass communication, faces radical transformation. New technologies for targeting individuals and sophisticated methods for shaping personalized messages have begun to reconstruct politics and relations among individuals in society. At the same time that the individual communication experience is changing rapidly, the public policy environment in many nations favors *laissez faire*, market solutions for issues ranging from distribution and use of bandwidth, to social responsibility in program content, to the cost and content of the messages in elections and public policy campaigns.

The coincidence of a new millennium with a new era of mediated communication offers a propitious moment to rethink the field of political communication. This book explores the changing media environments facing contemporary democracy and suggests new theoretical directions for the field. Since the communication environment raises profound questions about the role of citizens and the conduct of democracy, the book also considers important normative issues that emerge within this transformed communication landscape. By combining new developments in political communication with core questions about politics and policy, we hope in this volume to set new benchmarks and perspectives for development of the field.

We were fortunate in this enterprise to have two opportunities to gather as a group to debate and discuss the issues facing mediated democracies today. The generous funding of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania enabled workshops to be held in Washington, DC, and Philadelphia. Scholars from different nations and different intellectual perspectives cannot be counted on to

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PREFACE

agree on the same questions, much less the same answers. This lively group did not disappoint. However, we reached a surprising level of consensus on several broad tensions emerging in democratic societies as new communication technologies increasingly define, or at least “mediate,” the human political experience.

First is the tension between diversity and commonality. The problem here concerns the levels of common identification required for living together. As media outlets proliferate and audiences are sliced and diced into more specialized segments, what will befall the common information space? The positive spin on the new trends is to stress the growing diversity in mediated information. More choice means more satisfaction for consumers and, perhaps, more chance for varied views to enter public discourse and contend for allegiance. However, the negative spin on these same trends would emphasize the fragmentation of the public. It seems likely that smaller, more homogeneous public spheres will arise alongside of, if not supplant, the larger, more heterogeneous public sphere that arguably dominated politics. In the old days when people could only choose between two to four TV channels and a newspaper or two, most citizens shared common mediated political experiences. What is the future of *imagined communities* as broad collective identifications give way to more focused, less geographically rooted communities that are more likely to be infused with consumer rather than political values?

A second and related political tension might be termed the problem of free information choice versus necessary citizen education. The problem here is one of information stratification and equality among publics: How much inequality of knowledge is sustainable in democracies? This concern arises from the age-old but newly compelling question of whether media should give people what they want, or rather should also give them what they need. In a predominantly commercial system such as the United States, profit pressures and audience calculations have never been far from the thoughts of media executives, but the economic trends of the late twentieth century have magnified them to a perhaps unprecedented degree. If, as it appears, market values will increasingly govern media behavior, both in the United States and elsewhere, we can predict some of the developments, as analyzed in this volume. These include a decrease in the quality of news as media compete desperately for audience attention; a corresponding distortion of news editorial choices by entertainment sensibilities; a blurring of once-clearer distinctions between advertising or promotional messages

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PREFACE

and news coverage; yet also an increase in the quality and number of specialized media targeting narrower audiences. All those trends together bespeak the conflict between the lurking potential of stratification in the efflorescence of media products and the relative equality that existed when some attempt to find a citizen-oriented information standard or common denominator ruled. The past was never halcyon, but it arguably featured higher-quality mass news media, clearer demarcations between news and entertainment or advertising – and also smaller numbers of specialized media outlets.

The third tension we see evolving in many democratic communication systems is between treating people as consumer audiences or as citizen publics. Whether this is even a conflict is a matter of some contention here. If we regard individuals merely as consumers of media products, some contributors suggest, we may be inviting diminution in the autonomy, political involvement, and representation of mass citizens in the policy sphere, along with a serious corruption of the electoral process. If we put the stress on citizenship, we will look for ways that communication media can and do enhance autonomy, encourage political involvement, and strengthen representation of ordinary people in the policy sphere. Other contributors to this volume feel this tension is overstated. They look at new communication trends and see no real change in political behavior or democratic functioning. Some even point to a democratizing potential inherent in the media's growing concern, enforced by the increasingly competitive market, with satisfying consumers.

The chapters that follow are informed by these epochal changes occurring in political communication and democratic politics. The comparative focus on the American case enables us to understand how changes that are affecting many nations are rolling through a particular political system. We hope that future analyses will introduce new comparative considerations based on other national and transnational cases and that these analyses will appear in this series.

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