

# Mediated Politics

COMMUNICATION IN THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY

*Edited by*

W. Lance Bennett  
*University of Washington*

Robert M. Entman  
*North Carolina State University*



**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA  
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia  
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain  
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa  
<http://www.cambridge.org>

© W. Lance Bennett and Robert M. Entman 2001

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception  
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,  
no reproduction of any part may take place without  
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2001

Printed in the United States of America

*Typeface* Minion 11/13 pt.    *System* QuarkXPress [BTS]

*A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data*

Mediated politics: communication in the future of democracy / edited by W. Lance  
Bennett, Robert M. Entman.

p. cm. – (Communication, society and politics)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-78356-9

1. Communication in politics. 2. Communication – Political aspects. 3. Democracy.  
I. Bennett, W. Lance. II. Entman, Robert M. III. Series.

JA85.M44 2000

320'01'4–dc21      00-023855

ISBN 0 521 78356 9 hardback

ISBN 0 521 78976 1 paperback

# Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	page xii
<i>List of Tables</i>	xiii
<i>Contributors</i>	xv
<i>Preface</i>	xxiii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xxvii
1 Mediated Politics: An Introduction <i>W. Lance Bennett and Robert M. Entman</i>	1
Part 1 Democracy and the Public Sphere	
2 The Public Sphere and the Net: Structure, Space, and Communication <i>Peter Dahlgren</i>	33
3 Promoting Political Engagement <i>William A. Gamson</i>	56
4 The Internet and the Global Public Sphere <i>Colin Sparks</i>	75
Part 2 Citizens, Consumers, and Media in Transition	
5 Reporting and the Push for Market-Oriented Journalism: Media Organizations as Businesses <i>Doug Underwood</i>	99
6 Political Discourse and the Politics of Need: Discourses on the Good Life in Cyberspace <i>Don Slater</i>	117

## CONTENTS

7	Dividing Practices: Segmentation and Targeting in the Emerging Public Sphere <i>Oscar H. Gandy, Jr.</i>	141
8	Let Us Infotain You: Politics in the New Media Environment <i>Michael X. Delli Carpini and Bruce A. Williams</i>	160
9	The Future of the Institutional Media <i>Timothy E. Cook</i>	182
Part 3 Mediated Political Information and Public Opinion		
10	Reframing Public Opinion as We Have Known It <i>Robert M. Entman and Susan Herbst</i>	203
11	Political Waves and Democratic Discourse: Terrorism Waves During the Oslo Peace Process <i>Gadi Wolfsfeld</i>	226
12	Monica Lewinsky and the Mainsprings of American Politics <i>John Zaller</i>	252
13	The Big Spin: Strategic Communication and the Transformation of Pluralist Democracy <i>W. Lance Bennett and Jarol B. Manheim</i>	279
14	The Impact of the New Media <i>W. Russell Neuman</i>	299
Part 4 Mediated Campaigns		
15	Issue Advocacy in a Changing Discourse Environment <i>Kathleen Hall Jamieson</i>	323
16	Implications of Rival Visions of Electoral Campaigns <i>C. Edwin Baker</i>	342
17	Mediated Electoral Democracy: Campaigns, Incentives, and Reform <i>Bruce I. Buchanan</i>	362
18	“Americanization” Reconsidered: U.K.–U.S. Campaign Communication Comparisons Across Time <i>Jay G. Blumler and Michael Gurevitch</i>	380

## CONTENTS

Part 5 Citizens: Present and Future	
19 Citizen Discourse and Political Participation: A Survey <i>Roderick P. Hart</i>	407
20 Adapting Political News to the Needs of Twenty-First Century Americans <i>Doris A. Graber</i>	433
21 National Identities and the Future of Democracy <i>Wendy M. Rahn and Thomas J. Rudolph</i>	453
22 Communication in the Future of Democracy: A Conclusion <i>Robert M. Entman and W. Lance Bennett</i>	468
<i>Index</i>	481

## Figures

Figure 4.1	Internet hosts in millions at January 1, 1998 and January 1, 1999	<i>page</i> 84
Figure 4.2	Growth of Internet hosts by domain name	88
Figure 10.1	Surveyed public support for defense spending drops as spending increases	214
Figure 10.2	Surveyed opinion parallels media references to Soviet threat	218
Figure 12.1	The effect of political information and partisanship on attitudes toward the Lewinsky matter	257
Figure 12.2	Trends in partisan attachment and loyalty, 1952–1996	272
Figure 12.3	The impact of economic performance on presidential elections	274
Figure 14.1	Characteristic normal distribution of public opinion	306
Figure 14.2	Bimodal politics, France in the 1950s	307
Figure 14.3	Polarized views of racially based hiring preferences (stratification)	308
Figure 14.4	Campaign interest by level of political knowledge	313
Figure 14.5	Sample issue item by level of political knowledge	314
Figure 14.6	Illustrative policy item: opinion distribution for different knowledge levels	316
Figure 15.1	Television ad for the People for the American Way	332
Figure 16.1	Models of democracy and elections	350
Figure 17.1	The electoral triangle model	363
Figure 19.1	Range of writer appreciation	418
Figure 19.2	Significant correlations among political variables	423

## Tables

Table 4.1 Percentages of U.S. households with a computer, modem, telephone, and e-mail 1994 and 1997	<i>page</i> 81
Table 4.2 Percentages of U.S. households with a computer ranked by income for 1997	82
Table 10.1 Surveyed opinion on defense spending increases and number of Soviet threat stories	217
Table 11.1 Number of articles about Beit Lid attack	237
Table 11.2 First day newspaper coverage of Beit Lid attack	239
Table 12.1 The effect of partisanship on responses to the Lewinsky scandal	256
Table 12.2 The “Lewinsky economy” in historical perspective	259
Table 12.3 Trends in Clinton job approval ratings in initial phase of Lewinsky matter	264
Table 14.1 Various issue items by level of political knowledge	315
Table 17.1 Media coverage categories 1988, 1992, and 1996, in percentages	370
Table 17.2 Voting and learning citizen incentives and disincentives	372
Table 19.1 Comparison of U.S. data to 10-city sample	411
Table 19.2 Survey of editors	414
Table 19.3 Respondents’ attitudes toward writers	419
Table 19.4 Differences between writers and nonwriters	422
Table 19.5 Factor structure for main variables	424
Table 20.1 Age-related differences in following government and public affairs “most” plus “some of the time,” 1966–1996	436
Table 20.2 Interest in technological innovations by generation: percent who are “definitely interested”	437

TABLES

Table 20.3	News consumption attitudes and behaviors by age groups	442
Table 20.4	“Regularly” and “sometimes” used news sources, April 1996	443
Table 20.5	News interests by generation: percent of viewers who are “very interested” in the topic	444
Table 21.1	Age and national identity in the United States	458
Table 21.2	Age and national identity in Europe	460
Table 21.3	Determinants of national identity and support for the European Union	463



## Mediated Politics: An Introduction

W. Lance Bennett and Robert M. Entman

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.

## 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-*

*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

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.

## INTRODUCTION

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

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-

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

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.



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-

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

shift can be detected from an earlier time when smaller media companies – in compliance with stronger government regulations – proclaimed at least some public responsibility to the more recent corporate swagger that asserts primary obligation to stockholders' investments and the accompanying claim that consumer demand suffices as a measure of social accountability.

By the 1990s nations all over the world were bowing to the inexorable force of technological innovations that make it less expensive to engage in electronic communication. Governments opened up media markets just about everywhere, increasing competition among larger numbers of media outlets. This has produced in many cases a decrease in audience size for established mass media, chiefly daily newspapers and broadcast radio and television. Even as audiences for the traditional media shrank, they grew for such newer media as cable and satellite-delivered television and World Wide Web sites. The vastly increased number of outlets allowed for increased tailoring of media content to specific tastes of smaller groups. Programming resources that might once have gone to "least common denominator" productions acceptable but less than optimal for the majority of audience members shifted to production of shows more precisely suited for varying, smaller groups. Thus we see cable and satellite television networks for gourmet food lovers, golf lovers, old movie lovers, and so on. In state broadcast organizations such as the BBC in Britain, both news and entertainment programming decisions are increasingly subject to review based on audience research and an eye to ratings.

The decision calculus that determines "who gets to see, hear, or read what" is increasingly complex in both public and private media systems. Some observers suggest that open markets and competition enrich the flow of information to audiences, as in deals that bring international news services into China from sources such as Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation and Time Warner's CNN. Other ways of viewing these same developments suggest that competition occurs within constraints imposed by profits, product costs, and programming decisions based on market positions. For example, Murdoch himself canceled a book deal between one of his publishing companies and Chris Patton, the former British governor of Hong Kong, and a vocal critic of the transition to Chinese rule. Many observers alleged that Murdoch acted to avoid alienating the new Chinese rulers as they contemplated the terms of his entry into the Chinese cable television market.

Advocates of competition and government deregulation argue that

enhancing economic efficiency is a good thing, since, by definition, it improves consumers' satisfaction levels at the lowest possible cost. However, the increasing penetration of market logic into the political aspects of communication also has disquieting implications. Above all, there is no reason to expect that competitive economic markets will automatically supply what economists call "public goods," such as (in this case) an informed citizenry or more democratic participation (Keane 1991; Tunstall and Palmer 1991). Even if consumers were willing to pay for such goods, there is no easy way for the market to capture revenues from providing them. Predictably, then, the supply of the goods may diminish even as economic efficiency flourishes in media markets. Under the old order of stronger government regulation (in the United States) and government-sponsored public service broadcasting (in most of the world's democracies), broadcasters and, in many cases, newspaper publishers were pushed to help fill these social needs – imperfectly, to be sure. But regulation virtually disappeared in the United States by 1990, and the public broadcasters in many nations now share the airwaves with commercial competitors. State broadcasting systems entering these competitive environments typically encounter loss of revenues, shrinking audiences and influence, and greater constraints in programming decisions (with important qualifications, as noted, for example, in Chap. 18, by Blumler and Gurevitch, on the United Kingdom).

The flip side of the market argument, then, is that under less competitive, less economically efficient systems, there are generally greater incentives and resources for the government and private media to promote educational, cultural, political, documentary, arts and literature, and public interest programming. These programming options based on considerations other than profits and audience demographics tend to be squeezed at the margin in market systems.

Even newspaper systems are affected by the new market trends. In England, for example, Mr. Murdoch owns both the leading tabloid, the *Sun*, and the leading prestige paper, the *Times of London*. Somehow the venerable *Times* neglected even to report Murdoch's decision to cancel publication of Governor Patton's book, despite the prominence of Mr. Patton and his awaited memoir, and despite the volume of controversy generated by the decision in other British media. In America, market forces long ago eliminated competing daily papers in most cities. More recently, the era of local ownership of the remaining papers has all but ended as well, with the acquisition of most newspapers by large pub-

licly traded corporations whose managers are legally (and many would say, morally) obligated to maximize profits. Under private local ownership, newspapers could choose to use some of their revenues for features of little interest to most readers, or for standing up to advertiser pressure, or to honor the owner's sense of community involvement by covering the activities of government and civic groups. Today the local paper in most American towns is more likely to cover the latest killing spree than the city council debate about library funding, more likely to squeeze political features out in favor of food, fashion, sports, and weather, and more likely to run political coverage from its national syndicate rather than from local perspectives. These trends are signs of pressures to economize and to maximize profits, as Doug Underwood documents in Chap. 5.

All in all, then, the transition to a new century witnesses an unusual confluence of economic, technological, and policy changes that may have profound, though hardly clear implications for democracy. Consider just some of the specific changes underway.

*THE DECLINE OF TRULY MASSIVE (E.G., NATIONAL) MASS MEDIA AUDIENCES.* In the United States, for example, the national network television news and entertainment ratings measuring audience size shrank during the 1990s, in some cases by fully 50 percent. In some demographic groups at some times, cable has eclipsed broadcasting. For example, Nickelodeon often attracts more child viewers than the traditional big three broadcast networks, ABC, CBS, and NBC. Meanwhile, daily newspaper circulation continues its decades-long descent. One consequence of these trends is that increasing numbers of individuals enter mediated realities in which their traditional group memberships and sense of common social experience are less relevant. For political communication this may mean that both political inputs and citizen expectations have become more personalized, and thereby less likely to be satisfied by standard government action. For these and other reasons, social knowledge, interest in and support for government, and common political identifications have become less widely shared. Chap. 21, by Rahn and Rudolph, discusses these results in detail.

*THE RISE OF THE INTERNET.* In the Internet world, individual audience members split off into tens of thousands of different message environments at a given time, in contrast to the halcyon days of television's dominance, when tens of millions joined in simultaneously watching one of three or four shows. The transformation of the Internet into a new kind of highly segmented mass medium suggests a host of

questions about the constitution of news, the common standards for creating and evaluating information, the formation of virtual political groups, and the potential decline of political organizations in society. Many of the contributors to this book touch upon various political or social implications of these developments in networked communication.

*GROWTH OF ADVERTISING ON COMPUTER NETWORKS.* As corporations have begun vigorously investing in the Internet, online advertising expenditures grew during the late 1990s at 20 to 30 percent per quarter, a rate that augurs profound change. Advertising was the engine that made American broadcast network television a dominant and fabulously profitable medium through the 1980s. Advertising goes to where the eyeballs are, and to the extent it alters its targets and channels, it both reflects and reinforces the changing locus of media power. One result of the rapid commercialization of the Internet is that its status as an independent, freely accessible, global forum may be quickly jeopardized. The Internet may develop just as American broadcasting did: after a somewhat anarchistic period of open access and high hopes for diversity, noncommercial sites will become marginalized, difficult to find, and not very influential. And as opposed to broadcasting where, as we have discussed, most nations operated until recently on different bases from that in the United States, the American commercial model could more or less completely and rapidly take over the Internet.

A visit to “virtual activist” sites such as Corporate Watch (British based) or Essential Information (American) illustrates both the sweep of global political networking made possible by the Internet and the level of concern among “Net activists” that commercialization of the Net will curtail a more democratic political future. Even the forms and selection of information that define what we think of as news are changing with the integration of advertising and editorial decisions, which has advanced more completely on the Net than in more traditional media. For example, commercial news sites typically link news and other information features to related products sold by advertisers on the site. Thus, a news story on terrorists in a CNN news site may be keyed to books on terrorism available through a sponsoring publisher or bookseller. Of course, this particular example could be viewed as a service to readers, indeed as a blow for literacy and informed citizenship – assuming the books highlighted are not exclusively those connected to Time Warner, which owns the Book-of-the-Month Club, Warner Books, and Little, Brown. Nonetheless, as consumer values,

from health to entertainment interests, increasingly drive news decisions in general, the gatekeeping role of advertisers along with the intrusion of corporate public relations into news content decisions may all become more pronounced.

*CONVERGENCE.* Harbingers of the long-predicted convergence in media appeared by the late 1990s. Microsoft's Windows 98 desktop had icons for something it called "channels," meaning links to Web sites that look increasingly like interactive television channels that offer continually updated and integrated video, audio, and text. Various internet "gateways" such as America Online and Yahoo! also offered channels for direct links to shopping, travel, and entertainment industry sites. For the increasing numbers of households enjoying broadband connections to the Internet, RealPlayer offers desktop connections to a wide array of Web sites providing live video, including Bloomberg Financial Network, CNN Headline News, ABC News, the Comedy Channel, and ZDTV (computer information), as well as several dozen live radio feeds ranging from National Public Radio (United States) to Deutsche Welle (Germany) and CBC (Canada), to large choices of stations featuring rock, jazz, pop, classical, and country music, among others. Future services will provide arrays of computerized communication outlets comparable in variety to most cable and satellite television offerings, and, of course, far surpassing traditional over-the-air broadcasting. The time is near when fully integrated systems of computing, video, audio, phone, and mail will exist in the home for those who can afford it.

This future raises important questions about the technological "haves" and "have nots" in the future of democratic communication systems. It also generates concerns about the continuing shrinkage of the political universe as increasingly individualized expectations about political representation develop from such highly personalized communication links. With the advent of more personalized communication will come ever more sophisticated means of tracking consumer preferences for products, information services, entertainment on demand, and even political candidates and public policies. Interactivity is spawning a new era in which market research will be volunteered increasingly, if largely unknowingly, by consumers themselves, as an integrated feature of their daily media use.

*SEGMENTATION.* Beyond variety and convergence of communication media lie the even more important traits of interactivity and specialization. The new media give individual audience members the ability to tailor media choices to their particular interests. To some unpredictable

extent, the mass audience will increasingly peel off into ever-smaller niches. The traditional capacity of mass media to shape common experiences, promote shared discourse and agendas, and move public opinion will likely decline. Some observers celebrate the increasing individualization of political and social experience. However, the unanswered question that must be addressed in evaluating this new communication order is whether the representative processes on which all democracies depend – and which have developed from quite different social and communication circumstances in different societies – can aggregate increasingly segmented, individualized political demands, and channel them into coherent and legitimate public policies. One thing that we do know at this point is that reaching the fragmented public of this new communication order requires increasingly sophisticated communication strategies developed and implemented by professionals who typically operate beyond accountability to the ideals of democracy.

*THE INCREASING PROFESSIONALIZATION OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION.* As Blumler and Kavanaugh (1999) view the last half-century of communication primarily in Western European, British, and North American settings, they note three markedly different political eras:

- Prior to the television age, political messages were constructed primarily through parties and interest associations and transmitted through those organizations and related civic groups to individuals. Such communication was characteristically ideological at its source, yet tempered by the pragmatic social exchanges required to forge alliances among organized groups in order to maximize power in the political arena.
- With the rise of mass media and national audiences, political communication gradually became professionalized, through the reliance on pollsters, image consultants, press strategists, performance coaches, and the routinization of relations between journalists and their political sources. The defining characteristic of political communication in this period (roughly bounded by the saturation of broadcast television and the rise of cable), was the mass marketing of symbols to forge broad identifications and mobilize large numbers of individuals, often outside of their local social affiliations.
- In the third era of political communication, professionalization of politics came of age. This period corresponds roughly to the rise



## INTRODUCTION

of direct-marketing methods, the proliferation of electronic channels, and the advent of new opinion-assessment technologies (e.g., focus groups, cognitive mapping, and political-performance evaluation through electronic audience feedback).

As noted in the “Segmentation” section, mass audiences have been broken down or segmented in the present era into strategically targeted groups for which highly personalized messages and delivery systems are constructed by the growing ranks of pollsters, strategists, and spin doctors who work behind the scenes of modern democracies. Politics is no longer a game for low budget amateurs. Journalists are increasingly outnumbered by public relations professionals who see placing stories in the news as the means of amplifying and authenticating their messages. With information selectively targeted to constructed publics, it is important to ask whether commonality of public engagement may diminish to the point of having democracies without citizens (Entman 1989).

## OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

The authors of this book have come together through two conferences and many e-mail exchanges to explore the effects of this new era of political communication on society and democratic politics. As noted above, we focus primarily on the United States, but use concepts and frameworks that encourage comparisons with other political systems. Throughout this exploration, we are reminded at various points that the trends we are exploring do not yield simplistic generalities about the prospects for democracy in our increasingly wired world. However, the trends that we identify do raise important issues that should be faced squarely by scholars, policy makers, and citizens alike. The alternative to careful study and policy formulation in every nation is to allow an otherwise unfathomable mix of forces such as new communication technologies, the political professionals who use those technologies, and the imperatives of global media and technology markets to determine the future of politics.

## DEMOCRACY AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Peter Dahlgren in Chap. 2 opens with a general discussion of conceptions of the public sphere, focusing on areas of controversy that are important for rethinking democratic theory in the media age. He then

turns to the important question of whether the increasingly personalized medium of the Internet is likely to promote or undermine a more vibrant public life. At this embryonic stage, the Internet holds considerable democratic promise, but it also betrays individual proclivities to seek communities and information that do little to advance coherent citizen engagement on matters of public significance.

In Chap. 3, William Gamson examines the qualities of mediated public discourse that affect the prospects for citizen engagement on different issues in the United States and Germany. The importance of understanding how media systems interact with the public and the government is underscored by the differences in media discourse on a range of issues from abortion to nuclear power in the United States, and in the surprising contrast in abortion discourse in the American and German cases. It is clear that existing communication systems are capable of generating high quality discourse that motivates responsible citizen engagement. It is equally clear that such relatively sophisticated public discourse and public engagement is absent in many areas of politics. An important question emerging from Gamson's work is how – under what conditions – such engaging communication occurs, and whether it can be promoted across a broader range of issues facing society.

Perhaps the great irony of the growing person-to-person, or point-to-point communications capabilities on the planet is that their potential is not being harnessed systematically for coordinated, collective deliberation and decision making. Chap. 4, by Colin Sparks, explores the degree to which an increasingly wired globe permits individuals to engage in useful deliberative communication about the issues that arguably affect them in common. He introduces a variety of data suggesting that there is little likelihood either within nations or in the global context of attaining anything approaching an ideal (Habermasian) public sphere. While sheer volumes of information and communication may be rising, there is little evidence that the noisy exchange of human messages is finding political order through equality of citizen access or mechanisms for resolving political differences. Nor do many governments appear to be hard at work creating new communication channels beyond elections for linking various deliberative publics to momentous decisions affecting health, education, retirement security, moral codes, employment security, income, wealth and power distribution, business practices, genetic engineering, and the global environment.

## INTRODUCTION

It is ironic that the new technologies hold the potential for creating common communication across broad communities, yet there is little push either from civic-minded consumers or from social, economic, or political leaders in this direction. To the contrary, the opposing tendency toward ever more personalized, individually targeted communication may result in greater fragmentation of interests, social realities, and political impulses. Todd Gitlin has described this global tendency away from more coherent public spheres as resulting in increasingly isolated and fragmented “public sphericules” (Gitlin 1998). He argues that this technologically assisted centrifugal push away from common discourse also entails a widening gap between the wired and the unwired, the electronic haves and have nots: those who are included in political communication audiences, and those who are not. These concerns are expressed and explored throughout this book by Gandy, Entman and Herbst, Neuman, Bennett and Manheim, Jamieson, Buchanan, and Baker. The degree to which broad sections of the public are engaged in thinking, speaking, and acting on policy issues is the core measure of democracy. How mediated communication promotes or impedes such democratic engagement is the core of the earlier conceptual distinction between the *public sphere* (the patterns of public exchanges on all matters of social interest) and the *policy sphere* (those exchanges that are pertinent to formal political decisions).

### CITIZENS, CONSUMERS, AND MEDIA IN TRANSITION

Flowing from the above broad political definitions, we address a variety of questions about the role of citizens in electronic democracies, and about how communication systems may facilitate or frustrate citizen impact on the policy sphere. Many of the chapters address current communication fashions that treat members of the public as isolated consumers who pilot their own personal political destinies. A central question is whether the political fates of individuals addressed as consumers tend to involve realities, however personally stimulating, that are trapped within fragmenting public sphericules that offer few outlets for effective and satisfying participation in the policy sphere. At the core of this tension is the related question of whether citizens are shrinking from their citizen roles (measured in various trends of declining party loyalty, reduced voting, and greater antagonism toward government itself) because government is truly less relevant to personal lives, or because social realities based on such personal atomization

make it hard to aggregate interests and achieve meaningful political representation.

As large national and global corporations increasingly absorb media outlets, the definition of both the products and their audiences inevitably shifts from social responsibility to profits. The United States represents a startling case of rapid commercialization and corporate merger of media. As Chap. 5, by Doug Underwood, indicates, the once clear divisions in news organizations between marketing the product and editorial decisions about what the product should be are disappearing rapidly. News organizations are increasingly driven by audience research that conflates cost and profit calculations with consumer demands. One result is that the amount of space devoted to detailed policy issues is shrinking (both because such material is relatively costly to produce, and because audiences that are treated as consumers prefer to consume information about movies, music, sports, food, fashion, and lifestyles).

In Chap. 6, Don Slater argues that as publics are more defined around consumer values, the discourses of public life become discourses of consumption far removed from the array of issues in the policy sphere. This holds for arenas ranging from shopping to the assertion of the supremacy of lifestyle freedoms, to the case that he examines here: the creation of communities dedicated to the use and exchange of pornography.

As personal pleasures of consumption become elevated over considerations of collective welfare, the political tendency is for relatively isolated communities to develop and to see government and policy intrusions as antagonistic. Thus, the public sphere becomes “consumed” with personal communication about consumption, while the policy sphere becomes negative and intrusive. And so we witness a global battle over the asserted right to trade freely in pornographic materials – a trade that is greatly facilitated by the new technologies of the Internet and the digital management of audio, visual, and text information. It is true that considerable policy sphere activity is dedicated to this question, but policy battles are often waged against those using the public communication space for purposes that others find objectionable. Indeed, the cyberpornographers see politics in the policy sphere as negative. They claim the right to be regarded as consumers alone, with a virtual society of their own, and many have effectively disowned any sense of a citizen’s obligations to engage with other’s concerns about the impact of pornographic communities on society as a whole. While