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Let Us Infotain You: Politics in the New Media Age

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NOTE: At the time of publication, the author Michael X. Delli Carpini was affiliated with Columbia University. Currently January 2008, he is a faculty member of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania.

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Let Us Infotain You: Politics in the New Media Age

Abstract
Political communications scholars, members of the press, and political elites have traditionally distinguished between entertainment and non-entertainment media. It is in public affairs media in general and news media in particular that politics is assumed to reside, and it is to this part of the media that the public is assumed to turn when engaging the political world. *Politics*, in this view, is a distinct and self-contained part of public life, and *citizen* is one role among many played by individuals. As a former network television executive put it, in the civic education of the American public, entertainment programming is recess.

But people, politics, and the media are far more complex than this. Individuals are *simultaneously* citizens, consumers, audiences, family members, workers, and so forth. Politics is built on deep-seated cultural values and beliefs that are imbedded in the seemingly nonpolitical aspects of public and private life. Entertainment media often provide factual information, stimulate social and political debate, and critique government, while public affairs media are all too often diversionary, contextless, and politically irrelevant.

In this chapter we build upon the premises contained in the opening quote from Edelman: that politics is largely a mediated experience; that political attitudes and actions result from the interpretation of new information through the lenses of previously held assumptions and beliefs; and that these lenses are socially constructed from a range of shared cultural sources. We also agree with Edelman that this has always been the case, and so to the extent that researchers have ignored or downplayed entertainment media, popular culture, art, and so forth, in the construction of both news and public opinion, we have missed a critical component of this process.

Disciplines
Social Influence and Political Communication

Comments
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Mediated Politics

COMMUNICATION IN THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY

Edited by

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University of Washington

Robert M. Entman
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Contents

List of Figures *page* xii
List of Tables xiii
Contributors xv
Preface xxiii
Acknowledgments xxvii

1 Mediated Politics: An Introduction 1
W. Lance Bennett and Robert M. Entman

Part 1 Democracy and the Public Sphere

2 The Public Sphere and the Net: Structure, Space, and Communication 33
Peter Dahlgren

3 Promoting Political Engagement 56
William A. Gamson

4 The Internet and the Global Public Sphere 75
Colin Sparks

Part 2 Citizens, Consumers, and Media in Transition

5 Reporting and the Push for Market-Oriented Journalism: Media Organizations as Businesses 99
Doug Underwood

6 Political Discourse and the Politics of Need: Discourses on the Good Life in Cyberspace 117
Don Slater

7 Dividing Practices: Segmentation and Targeting in the Emerging Public Sphere 141
Oscar H. Gandy, Jr.

8 Let Us Infotain You: Politics in the New Media Environment 160
Michael X. Delli Carpini and Bruce A. Williams

9 The Future of the Institutional Media 182
Timothy E. Cook

Part 3 Mediated Political Information and Public Opinion

10 Reframing Public Opinion as We Have Known It 203
Robert M. Entman and Susan Herbst

11 Political Waves and Democratic Discourse: Terrorism Waves During the Oslo Peace Process 226
Gadi Wolfsfeld

12 Monica Lewinsky and the Mainsprings of American Politics 252
John Zaller

13 The Big Spin: Strategic Communication and the Transformation of Pluralist Democracy 279
W. Lance Bennett and Jarol B. Manheim

14 The Impact of the New Media 299
W. Russell Neuman

Part 4 Mediated Campaigns

15 Issue Advocacy in a Changing Discourse Environment 323
Kathleen Hall Jamieson

16 Implications of Rival Visions of Electoral Campaigns 342
C. Edwin Baker

17 Mediated Electoral Democracy: Campaigns, Incentives, and Reform 362
Bruce I. Buchanan

18 "Americanization" Reconsidered: U.K.–U.S. Campaign Communication Comparisons Across Time 380
Jay G. Blumler and Michael Gurevitch

Part 5 Citizens: Present and Future

19 Citizen Discourse and Political Participation: A Survey 407
Roderick P. Hart

20 Adapting Political News to the Needs of Twenty-First Century Americans 433
Doris A. Graber

21 National Identities and the Future of Democracy 453
Wendy M. Rahn and Thomas J. Rudolph

22 Communication in the Future of Democracy: A Conclusion 468
Robert M. Entman and W. Lance Bennett

Index 481

CHAPTER 8

Let Us Infotain You: Politics in the New Media Environment

Michael X. Delli Carpini and Bruce A. Williams

> Political beliefs and actions spring from assumptions, biases, and news reports. In this critical sense politics is a drama taking place in an assumed and reported world that evokes threats and hopes, a world people do not directly observe or touch. . . . The models, scenarios, narratives, and images into which audiences for political news translate that news are social capital, not individual inventions. They come from works of art in all genres: novels, paintings, stories, films, dramas, television sitcoms, striking rumors, even memorable jokes. For each type of news report there is likely to be a small set of striking images that are influential with large numbers of people, both spectators of the political scene and policymakers themselves.
>
> Murray Edelman, *From Art to Politics* (p. 1)

> We are living in an era where the wall between news and entertainment has been eaten away like the cartilage of David Crosby's septum.
>
> Al Franken, Chief Political Correspondent, *Comedy Central*

Political communications scholars, members of the press, and political elites have traditionally distinguished between entertainment and nonentertainment media. It is in public affairs media in general and news media in particular that politics is assumed to reside, and it is to this part of the media that the public is assumed to turn when engag-

ing the political world. *Politics*, in this view, is a distinct and self-contained part of public life, and *citizen* is one role among many played by individuals. As a former network television executive put it, in the civic education of the American public, entertainment programming is recess.

But people, politics, and the media are far more complex than this. Individuals are *simultaneously* citizens, consumers, audiences, family members, workers, and so forth.[1] Politics is built on deep-seated cultural values and beliefs that are imbedded in the seemingly nonpolitical aspects of public and private life. Entertainment media often provide factual information, stimulate social and political debate, and critique government, while public affairs media are all too often diversionary, contextless, and politically irrelevant.

In this chapter we build upon the premises contained in the opening quote from Edelman: that politics is largely a mediated experience; that political attitudes and actions result from the interpretation of new information through the lenses of previously held assumptions and beliefs; and that these lenses are socially constructed from a range of shared cultural sources. We also agree with Edelman that this has always been the case, and so to the extent that researchers have ignored or downplayed entertainment media, popular culture, art, and so forth, in the construction of both news and public opinion, we have missed a critical component of this process.[2]

But we further argue that this omission is not a coincidence. Rather it has been supported by a set of understandable but ultimately artificial structures and practices of the media, academic researchers, and political elites that distinguish fact from opinion, public affairs from popular culture, news from nonnews, and citizens/consumers from experts/producers. These walls – in place throughout most of this century – are rapidly eroding, the result of changing communications technologies, the new economics of mass media, and broader cultural trends. This erosion not only makes more obvious the political significance of popular culture in the social construction and interpretation of the news, but also makes the very distinction between news and nonnews increasingly untenable. The resulting media environment is rearranging traditional power relationships as the authority of journalists, public officials, and other political gatekeepers is increasingly challenged by other producers of political and social meaning – including the public itself.

To explore these issues, we first critically analyze the distinction

between public affairs and entertainment media, the way this distinction has become reified, and the reasons for its recent erosion. Media coverage of the Lewinsky-Clinton scandal (and its precursors) provide us with a rich example of this erosion, and of the new power struggle over defining and framing the public agenda that it has unleashed. We conclude by discussing the role of the public in this new media environment, suggesting that while traditional gatekeepers have lost much of their agenda-setting authority, it is unclear who, if anyone, has taken their place.

THE INHERENT ARBITRARINESS OF THE NEWS – ENTERTAINMENT DISTINCTION

Despite the seeming naturalness of the distinction between news and entertainment media, it is remarkably difficult to identify the characteristics upon which this distinction is based. In fact, it is difficult – we would argue impossible – to articulate a theoretically useful definition of this distinction. The opposite of *news* is not *entertainment*, as the news is often diversionary or amusing (the definition of entertainment) and what is called "entertainment" is often neither. One might instead use the terms *public affairs* media and *popular* media, but these distinctions also collapse under the slightest scrutiny. Does the definition of public affairs media require that it be *un*popular? Does the broadcasting of a presidential address shift from public affairs to popular media because it is watched by too many people? And how does one classify the many magazine stories, novels, movies, television shows – in all their rapidly changing formats such as melodramas, docudramas, docusoaps, and talk shows – that address issues of public concern? Clearly the concept of popular media does not provide a counterpoint to public affairs. To the contrary, the "public" in public affairs indicates that the issues discussed are of importance to a substantial segment of the citizenry, and most of what is studied under this heading *is* popular by any reasonable definition of the term.

The difficulty in even *naming* the categories upon which we base so fundamental a distinction is more than semantics. Rather it highlights the artificiality of this distinction. A more fruitful approach might be to identify the key characteristics that are assumed to distinguish politically relevant from politically irrelevant media. But this does more to blur than clarify the traditional news/nonnews categories. Public affairs

media address real-world issues of relevance to a significant percentage of the citizenry, but so, too, does much of what traditionally falls outside of this genre: one would be hard pressed to find *any* substantive topic covered in the news that has not also been the subject of ostensibly nonnews media. And public affairs media generally, and the news more specifically, regularly address issues of culture, celebrity, and personality.

Attempting to define public affairs media in broader strokes also does little to resolve this conceptual dilemma. Walter Lippmann defined news as "the signalizing of an event" (Lippmann 1922). And yet entertainment media often play this role, drawing the public's attention to issues and events of social and political import (Delli Carpini and Williams 1994a; Fiske 1996). In short, all of the usual characteristics we associate with news or public affairs media can be found in other media, and those we associate with popular or entertainment media can be found in the news. We do not conclude from this that *all* media are equally relevant to politics or useful to democratic discourse. Rather we suggest that our traditional categories fail as a way of making such distinctions; that they are social constructions that tell us more about the distribution of political power than about the political relevance of different genres. Further, we argue that these categories are rapidly losing what power they once had to privilege certain gatekeepers and genres in the process of constructing political reality. Before exploring the implications of this changing media environment, however, it is instructive to examine how the current categories emerged and were supported, and why they have been eroding in recent years.

THE "WALLING OFF" OF NEWS AND THE CREATION OF AN INFORMATION ELITE

The now familiar distinction between news and entertainment can be traced in large part to the first several decades of the twentieth century, when economic, technological, political, and sociocultural changes redefined the roles of the mass media, citizens, and elites.[3] Growing centralization of ownership and decreasing competition in the printed press, coupled with the rise of an inherently centralized and expensive electronic media, threatened one of the presumed requisites of liberal democracy: a diverse marketplace of ideas. At the same time, the economics and politics of American life were becoming increasingly

nationalized (Lears 1983; Hanson 1985). In this centralized and nationalized environment, inherent tensions between the economic, entertainment, and civic goals of the media became increasingly difficult to ignore (Peterson 1956).

Adding to this sense of unease, social science research and real-world events in Europe and the United States throughout the first half of the twentieth century raised concerns regarding the stability of democratic systems and the civic capacity of democratic citizens (Berelson 1952; Schumpeter 1942). The public was increasingly seen as an inchoate, disengaged mass that was susceptible to manipulation by the media and that required protection from the media's propagandizing power (Lippmann 1925).

Concerns about the proper role of both the media and citizens led to greater emphasis on the role of experts, an emphasis that was part of broader attempts to distinguish elites from the masses in the first decades of the twentieth century. Progressive Era efforts to define government as the province of specially trained experts rather than easily corrupted elected officials or ignorant citizens have been well-chronicled. In a similar vein, Levine (1988) describes the ways in which dramatic changes in American society during the Progressive Era – industrialization, immigration, urbanization, and so forth – challenged existing cultural, social, and political definitions of what it meant to be American. In response, elites in a wide range of cultural arenas – theater, literature, museums, musical performance – sought to impose and protect their own definitions of American identity by developing aesthetic standards, rules of audience behavior, canons of "meritorious" art and literature, and other practices that constructed a new distinction between elite and mass audiences. The result was the elevation and celebration of that which was enjoyed by elites and a parallel devaluation of "the popular."

Driven in large part by the technological, economic, and cultural changes just discussed, three conceptual distinctions of importance to current theorizing about the media had emerged by the second half of this century. First, the news media were separated from entertainment media, with the former viewed as most directly responsible for fulfilling the media's civic function. Second, within the news media, fact became distinguished from opinion, and news reporting increasingly strove to be accurate, objective, and balanced (ostensibly obviating the need for a decentralized, competitive press). And third, the public was distinguished from media professionals and policy experts, with the

former viewed as passive, easily manipulated consumers of information, and the latter as information gatekeepers who took primary responsibility for determining and representing the public interest.

These distinctions were maintained through a set of institutional structures and processes:[4]

- The division of media organizations into separate news and entertainment divisions
- The assumption that public affairs programing would be free from (or less tied to) expectations of profitability
- Trade distinctions between news and entertainment media
- The physical layout and labeling of segments of publications and programs so as to distinguish news from analysis or opinion, and "hard" news from "soft" news or features
- The routinization of program schedules (e.g., local news in the early evening followed immediately by national news; local news again at 10 or 11 PM; political talk shows on Sunday mornings)
- The professionalization of journalists
- The development of formal and informal standard operating procedures to assist in determining newsworthiness

The limited number of television stations available to citizens (from one to five from the 1950s through at least the early 1980s), most or all of which broadcast news at the same time, also reinforced the news–entertainment distinction.

Distinctions between public affairs and popular media were also maintained by the nature of their respective audiences. Readers of prestige news magazines and newspapers and viewers of public affairs broadcasting were a self-selected segment of the population – a more elite social, economic, and political strata of citizens. This elite audience signaled the serious nature of what was being read or watched, distinguishing it from popular media. As with the distinction between high brow and low brow culture (Levine 1988), the politically significant and insignificant were defined as much by the organization of producing institutions and the makeup of the audience as by actual content.

In sum, the structural walling off of news from nonnews reified what was essentially a socially constructed distinction. As Schudson notes, the ideal of objective, professional journalists emerged "precisely when the impossibility of overcoming subjectivity in presenting the news was

widely accepted and . . . precisely *because* subjectivity had come to be regarded as inevitable" (1978, p. 157; emphasis added). Readers and viewers were signaled that something was news *because* it was on the evening news or the front page of the newspaper and that something was opinion *because* it appeared on the opinion page or was labeled as such on the evening news. Likewise, the *nonpolitical* was defined in part by where and when it appeared, how it was labeled, who presented it, and who attended to it.

THE BREAKDOWN OF THE NEWS–ENTERTAINMENT DISTINCTION

The media environment in the United States has changed dramatically in the last fifteen years, spurred in part by the proliferation of VCRs and remote television controls, the availability of cable and satellite television, the growth of the Internet and World Wide Web, the horizontal and vertical integration of the media through conglomerates, and so forth. These changes have dramatically increased the amount and range of information that is readily available, the speed with which it becomes available, and the opportunities for interactive mass communications (Abramson et al. 1988). They are also leading to a convergence (or at least blurring) of types of media, ownership of media, and media genres.

This new media environment is a hostile one for maintaining the always fragile distinction between public affairs and entertainment. The division of media organizations into separate news, entertainment, and sports divisions, while still in place, has become more porous, and thus journalists, management executives, public officials, and entertainers can develop celebrity identities that transcend any specific job description and allow them to move freely between both types of media and decreasingly distinct genres. In turn, the distinction between fact and opinion or analysis is much less clearly identified by simple rules such as where it appears, who is saying it, or how it is labeled. Public affairs time slots have become overwhelmed by the range of options open to citizens: Traditional news can be gotten any time of the day through cable or the Web, or equally ignored at any time of the day. Even the standard operating procedures, routines, and beats that determined newsworthiness have become subject to reconsideration both from within and outside the journalistic profession

(Rosen 1999). As audiences themselves absorb these changes and the resulting erosion of formerly commonsense distinctions, they too begin to move freely among media and genres (Delli Carpini and Williams 1994b).

Economic changes, many of which are the direct result of this new media environment, have further eroded the news–entertainment distinction. News divisions, once accepted as the industry's concession to the public good, are increasingly seen as potential sources of revenue. The downsizing of news organizations makes it increasingly difficult to perform their journalistic function with the same degree of care as in the past. Many of the federal regulations designed to assure at least a minimal amount of public affairs broadcasting and some degree of fairness and access have been dismantled or allowed to go unenforced. The growing centralization of the media into a handful of international communications conglomerates with interests in film, music, cable, and broadcast television increases the pressure for profit and further blur the line between news and entertainment (Bagdikian 1992).

In short, the new media are creating an environment that is increasingly incompatible with the structures and practices that maintained the news–entertainment distinction for most of this century. As these walls crumble, the form and content of news and entertainment come to resemble each other more closely, laying bare what has always been a socially constructed distinction.[5] What is clear is that this new media environment presents a direct challenge to the authority of elites – journalists, policy experts, public officials, academics, and the like – who served as gatekeepers under the old system. Less clear is to whom, if anyone, this authority has shifted. To some extent it is returning to the public, as they play a more active role in constructing social and political meaning out of the mix of mediated narratives with which they are presented. At the same time, there is evidence that new or marginalized groups, along with new or formerly nonpolitical media, are playing a more central role in setting and framing the public agenda. And, keeping in mind the first several decades of this century, it is quite possible that traditional media and political elites will emerge from the current period of flux having reasserted their gatekeeping role in some new form. In the next section we illustrate the blurring line between entertainment and news, and its complex impact on the agenda-setting process, by closely examining media coverage of the Lewinsky-Clinton spectacle.[6]

SEX, LIES, AND VIDEOTAPES: A CASE STUDY OF THE NEW MEDIA POLITICS

In mid-January 1992 *The Star*, a national tabloid specializing in stories about the personal lives of celebrities, published a story in which Gennifer Flowers claimed to have had a twelve-year affair with Bill Clinton, then the frontrunner for the Democratic nomination for president of the United States. The story was initially downplayed in the mainstream press, in part because the allegations were two years old. It was also initially ignored because the *Star*, described in one mainstream newspaper article as better than most of the national tabloids, but still a step below the *National Enquirer*, was deemed an unreliable news source.[7]

The decision by Bill and Hillary Clinton to directly address the issue by appearing on *60 Minutes* (a choice based in part because the show would air immediately following the Super Bowl) brought the issue more centrally into the mainstream press. The Clintons, who helped perfect the art of using the nontraditional press, also appeared on shows like *Prime Time Live*, *Donahue*, *The Arsenio Hall Show*, and *MTV* either to directly refute or to deflect the issue. While the Clintons' efforts were successful in rallying public support and partially diffusing the issue, the alleged affair had gained some legitimacy within the mainstream press as a campaign issue – members of the press could point to the existence of legitimate sources (for example, the Clintons themselves) and to the fact that other traditional news outlets were covering the story, to justify their expanded coverage. The press could also justify covering what was initially defined as a private matter by focusing on the issue of "lying to the public."

Nearly seven years later the Clinton presidency stood at the brink of dissolution, rocked by another sex scandal and another controversial Star(r) report – this time that of Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr – focusing on an alleged affair between President Clinton and a White House intern named Monica Lewinsky. By the fall of 1998 all notions that one could make clear-cut distinctions between serious and less serious news outlets, even between news and nonnews genres, had been effectively destroyed. Whether one started the day by listening to National Public Radio or Howard Stern, watching *Good Morning America* or *CNN*, reading the *New York Times* or the *Star*, the topic was the same.[8] Viewers of daytime talk shows such as NBC's *Leeza* could watch a panel – consisting of a Washington newspaper correspondent,

a public relations expert who works with celebrities, a gossip columnist, and a television star who had gone through a very public divorce – discuss the way Hillary Clinton was handling the media spotlight. An Internet search under the heading "Monica Lewinsky" would produce over 12,000 options, ranging from breaking news reports to "the Monica Lewinsky Fan Club." E-mails sharing the latest Clinton-Lewinsky jokes were commonplace in offices around the country. The early evening local and national news competed not only with each other, but with the on-line *Drudge Report* (50,000 hits per day at the height of the scandal, a large proportion of which were mainstream journalists themselves) and television tabloid shows like *Entertainment Tonight*, *Hard Copy*, and *A Current Affair* (the latter two whose names had taken on interesting double meanings) for the latest details and interpretations of the scandal. Prime time dramas and comedies either made direct references to the scandal, or their usual fare of sex, infidelity, power, and conspiracy took on new meanings. Cable talk shows like *Hardball* and *Rivera Live*, and all-news cable networks like MSNBC, became virtually "all-Monica, all the time." Late evening news was no different, to be followed into the wee hours by more "discussion" of the scandal by news anchor Ted Koppel; comedians Jay Leno, David Letterman, Bill Maher, and Conan O'Brien; and crossover personalities like sportscaster-turned-newscaster Keith Oberman. One could literally spend 24 hours a day watching, listening to, and reading about the Clinton scandal. More tellingly, one could do so without ever tuning in or picking up a traditional news source.

Reflecting the ability of the new media to obliterate both time and space, the story flowed across national borders, where it also crossed genres and audiences. For example, while serious commentary in Israeli newspapers focused on the impact of the scandal on prospects for a Middle East peace settlement, commercials for spot removers on Israeli television spoofed the scandal (private detectives searching Lewinsky's closet are distressed to find a can of the advertiser's spot remover lying next to "the" dress). Similarly, the scandal dominated the mainstream British press and was also used in commercials to sell a newspaper's weekly job listings (a Clinton impersonator asks his aide why he should be interested in the new job listings, since he already has a job. After a pause, he says, "Oh yeah, maybe I should take a look.").

It is obvious that any approach to political communication based upon clear-cut distinctions between fact and opinion or public affairs and entertainment is of little help in understanding the dynamics of

media coverage of the Clinton sex scandals as they developed between 1992 and 1998. While there are a number of frameworks one might use to attempt to make sense of this new world of mediated politics, two concepts – *hyperreality* and *multiaxiality* – are particularly applicable.

Hyperreality. For Fiske (1996), the central unit of analysis in studying the media (and the driving force in public discourse) is not objective reality, but "media events."[9] According to Fiske,

> The term *media event* is an indication that in a postmodern world we can no longer rely on a stable relationship or clear distinction between a "real" event and its mediated representation. Consequently, we can no longer work with the idea that the "real" is more important, significant, or even "true" than the representation. A media event, then, is not a mere representation of what happened, but it has its own reality, which gathers up into itself the reality of the event that may or may not have preceded it. (Fiske 1996, p. 2)

The intertwining of an event and its mediated representation produces what Baudrillard has called "hyperreality," and which Fiske defines as "a postmodern sense of the real that accounts for our loss of certainty in being able to distinguish clearly and hierarchically between reality and its representation, and being able to distinguish clearly and hierarchically between the modes of its representation" (p. 62).

The Lewinsky-Clinton scandal is nothing if not hyperreal. The questions of fact in the case – did Clinton engage in sex with Lewinsky? Did he lie about it? Did he commit perjury? – are *inextricably* tied to and ultimately overshadowed by the representations of these issues – Clinton's televised denial of sexual relations to the American public; the barrage of interpretations by partisan pundits, lawyers, and comedians; the nonstop release of rumors, leaks, and reports; the sounds and images of private phone conversations and grand jury testimony. The representation of these issues on the news, talk shows, and entertainment programs all build on the same set of mediated facts but deploy them in distinct ways. On other occasions these interpretations intersect, as on shows like *Politically Incorrect*, where guests drawn from entertainment, academia, politics, and the news media discuss contemporary issues like the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal.

These sometimes distinct, sometimes changing, and sometimes intersecting genres blur any notions of a hierarchy between fact and

fiction, or news and nonnews. For all the information available, and the speed with which it is available (President Clinton received the Starr report from Congress only an hour before the rest of the American Public did), there is no consensus on the facts or their significance because there is no longer a clear distinction between facts and their representation. In a world in which we have the ability to use the science of DNA testing to "prove" the occurrence of an event, but in which such evidence has no guarantee of carrying any more authority than a comedian's satirical comment or a lawyer's definition of sex, what does it mean to talk about the objective facts?[10]

The hyperreality of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal is perhaps best exemplified by recalling that it began as a result of an investigation of a decades-old land deal. The intersection of Whitewater with Gennifer Flowers, Paula Jones, Katherine Willey, Linda Tripp, and Monica Lewinsky, as well as with the alleged misuse of FBI files and the firings at the White House travel office was not illogical – one can certainly reconstruct the connections between potential misuse of power, the intimidation of witnesses, and so forth. But it was the dynamics of the media environment that transformed these incidents into a media event with its own complex and shifting meaning. In this hyperreal world, the specific facts become mere vehicles for discussion of more deep-seated, foundational issues about the human condition – political corruption, public and private trust, sexual mores, workplace harassment, personal relationships, and the like.

From this perspective, the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal was as much rooted in events as diverse as Watergate, the political and cultural movements of the 1960s, and the O. J. Simpson, Louise Woodward, and JonBenet Ramsey trials, as in the Whitewater or Paula Jones cases. It was also rooted in popular culture genres (films, television dramas and comedies, novels, and music), which address many of the same foundational issues. Sometimes these connections were obvious – terms like "Whitewatergate," "Filegate," "Travelgate," and "Fornigate" tied the Clinton scandals to those of the Nixon administration and in doing so tied the former to the long-standing public cynicism about government the latter engenders. Films like *Wag The Dog*, *Primary Colors*, and *An American President*, or television shows like *Spin City* – direct commentaries on the contemporary state of politics – occasionally became part of the discourse about the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal. For example, when the United States bombed a Sudanese pharmaceutical plant that was allegedly manufacturing chemical weapons, Kenneth Starr was

asked by a reporter whether he had seen *Wag The Dog* (in which a fictional president creates a fake war as a diversion from a sex scandal), and if he saw any parallels. If he didn't, Saddam Hussein did: Earlier in the year, Iraqi television broadcast a pirated copy of the movie at the height of tensions over U.N. weapons inspections and U.S. threats to launch air strikes. And an MSNBC story noted that a statement by President Clinton explaining his initial concerns over ordering the strike sounded remarkably like one made by the fictional president in *An American President* under similar circumstances.

Often, however, the connections between popular culture and the Clinton scandal were more subtle, based on the similarity of the underlying issues, values, or beliefs that were tapped rather than on direct references to contemporary politics. But this larger media environment, even when it never made specific reference to the Clinton sex scandal, was critically important in setting the context in which the scandal was interpreted.

MULTIAXIALITY. To argue that the new media environment creates a hyperreality in which reality and its representation begin to blur is not to say that this process occurs outside the realm of politics. As Fiske notes,

> [public discourse] is language in social use; language accented with its history of domination, subordination, and resistance; language marked by the social conditions of its use and its users; it is politicized, power-bearing language employed to extend or defend the interests of its discursive community. (Fiske 1996, p. 3)

The hyperreality of postmodern media events does not change this, but instead creates what Fiske calls *multiaxiality*: "As hyperreality dissolves stable categories of modes of representation, so multiaxiality transforms any stability of categories into the fluidities of power" (p. 65).

While Fiske focuses on the core axes of class, race, and gender in his discussion of public discourse, the concept of multiaxiality can be used to better understand the changing nature of mediated political discourse more broadly. Traditionally, the political agenda has been shaped by a symbiotic relationship between mainstream political actors and major news outlets (Bennett 1988; Hallin 1986, pp. 115–119). In this relationship, the media act as a monolithic gatekeeper, while a limited set of political elites vie with each other to shape the agenda and how it is framed. The public is reduced to the role of passive consumer,

whose own attention to and interpretation of events is constrained by this limited information environment.

This single axis system has been transformed in two ways. First, the expansion of politically relevant media and the blurring of genres leads to a struggle within the media itself for the role of authoritative gatekeeper. And second, the expansion of media outlets and the obliterating of the normal news cycle create new opportunities for non-mainstream political actors to influence the setting and framing of the political agenda.

The new media environment presents a challenge to mainstream journalists in their roles of agenda setter and issue framer. It is telling that throughout the Clinton sex scandals the mainstream press frequently paused to reflect on is own role, and to try to clarify (for itself and the public) what constitutes newsworthiness.[11] But the existence of multiple news outlets (cable news or talk shows, radio call-in shows, conservative publications like the *American Spectator*), quasi-news outlets (*Hard Copy*, *A Current Affair*), entertainment media (*The Tonight Show*, *Late Night with David Letterman*), and the Internet (e.g., *The Drudge Report*), all of which were in some sense covering the scandals, made it difficult for either the mainstream press or political elites to ignore or downplay them.

The impact of this multiaxial media environment can be seen in the pattern of coverage that characterized the Paula Jones incident.[12] While mainstream coverage ebbed and flowed throughout most of 1994 (driven largely by events in the civil suit), and all but disappeared throughout all of 1995 (as a result of legal appeals that put much of the case on hold), a number of alternative media outlets stuck consistently to the story, keeping the issue firmly on this subterranean agenda.

It was not until 1997 that the Paula Jones issue became an ongoing news story in the mainstream press, driven largely by events surrounding the civil suit and the increasingly inflammatory rhetoric coming from both the Clinton and the Jones camps. While in some ways this increased attention suggests that the mainstream news media had recaptured control of the political agenda, most of the stories written or aired during this period were initially generated through leaks, reports, and rumors that first emerged over the Internet, from conservative publications and the cable talk shows. Thus, while the mainstream press had more firmly embraced the issue as newsworthy, it was still reacting to an agenda that was being framed largely by others. Mainstream news sources like the evening news and the prestige news-

papers were also disadvantaged by the collapse of the normal twice-a-day news cycle and its rapid replacement with 24-hours-a-day breaking news (Kurtz 1998).

For all the attention generated by the Paula Jones case, it paled in comparison to the explosion of coverage that began with the allegation in January 1998 of President Clinton's affair with a White House intern. The last ten days of that month generated more newspaper stories around the country than all the articles and commentaries written on Gennifer Flowers and Paula Jones combined. While journalists continued to periodically stop and reflect on whether this was a topic worthy of so much attention, or to lament the decline in journalistic standards in reporting, by 1998 the mainstream news media had essentially succumbed to the new system. Alternative media figures (most notably, Matt Drudge) continued to indirectly shape mainstream media coverage, but also emerged as commentators or guests on serious news shows like *Meet the Press*. At the same time, mainstream print journalists and news reporters appeared with greater frequency on network and cable talk shows, both a reflection of their increased celebrity and a concession to the shifting balance of power in the media. Major publications like *Newsweek*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post* prepublished and updated their stories on the Internet, allowing the public to see the normally hidden process of constructing the news. Competing news outlets began to use each other – and in at least one case indirectly used *itself* – as sources for their stories.[13] The commentary of comedians like Jay Leno, David Letterman, Bill Maher, and Al Franken occasionally became the topic of the next day's news stories, while the day's news was increasingly the subject of that evening's monologue.

In short, in the six-year period from the publication of the *Star* expose to the publication of the *Starr* report, traditional journalism lost its position as the central gatekeeper of the nation's political agenda. For most of that period (arguably through 1997) the news media attempted to play its traditional role and found that the political agenda was being set without them. As a result it adapted to the new rules by increasingly mimicking the form and substance of its new media competitors.

Just as the new information environment created multiple axes of power within the media, it also created new axes among the political actors who shape the media's agenda. Authoritative sources have been traditionally limited to a largely mainstream political, economic, and social elite: elected officials, spokespersons for major interest groups,

and so forth. These sources, while attempting to shape the media environment in ways that would benefit their particular political agenda, understood and largely operated within the rules of traditional journalism. But the new media environment, with its multiple points of access and more continuous news cycle, has increased the opportunities for less mainstream individuals and groups to influence public discourse. This was certainly the case with the Clinton scandals.

While falling short of Hillary Clinton's claim of "a vast right-wing conspiracy," the attacks on Bill Clinton's financial and sexual behavior were orchestrated in large part by the religious and partisan far right. Of particular interest to us is the way this traditionally marginalized group effectively exploited the new media environment to create new axes of power.[14] For example, when Gennifer Flowers first went public with her affair, her contract with the *Star* was negotiated by John Hudgens, an Arkansas businessman who had been press secretary to two of Clinton's Republican challengers for governor. And it was Floyd Brown (head of the independent *Presidential Victory Committee* that produced the infamous "Willie Horton" political spot in 1988) who set up the 900 number where callers could listen to excerpts from the taped conversations between Clinton and Flowers. The Flowers affair was also kept in the news when ultraconservative congressman Robert Dornan read the entire *Star* expose into the Congressional Record while being broadcast on *C-Span*.

In December 1993, the *American Spectator*, a conservative monthly magazine, published the first reports that then Governor Clinton had used state troopers to facilitate his rendevous with Flowers and other women. The troopers' lawyer was Cliff Jackson, a former Oxford classmate of Bill Clinton and more recent critic who had been the source of the story about Clinton's draft dodging during the Vietnam war. It was Jackson who approached the *American Spectator* about doing the "troopergate" story, which was then picked up first by CNN and then by other major news outlets. Jackson also organized the 1994 news conference (sponsored by the *Conservative Political Action Conference*) in which Paula Jones announced her intent to file a sexual harassment suit against Clinton.

The Jones story was also initially kept in the news through conservative publications like the *Washington Times* and the *National Review*. When the mainstream press failed to cover the story with enough vigor, the conservative media watchdog group, *Accuracy in Media*, ran ads in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* criticizing them for

ignoring the issue. By this time Floyd Brown, now heading an organization called *Citizens United*, was acting as a clearinghouse for incriminating information about Clinton and providing leads to conservative G.O.P. congressional aides and reporters from both mainstream and nonmainstream media. The religious right also played an important role in maintaining the anti-Clinton media campaign. Jerry Falwell produced and distributed a video entitled *Circles of Power*, which "documented" a host of alleged ethical and moral violations of the President. And television evangelist and one-time Republican presidential candidate Pat Robertson interviewed Paula Jones on his nationally televised program.

Conservative groups found other creative ways to draw media attention to the Clinton scandals. In 1996 former F.B.I. agent Gary Aldrich published *Unlimited Access*, which alleged numerous (largely unsubstantiated) improprieties within the Clinton White House. In addition to becoming a bestseller, which was released in paperback as the Lewinsky scandal was at its peak, it was also given away free as an incentive to join the *Conservative Book Club*. In 1997 the *Free Congress Foundation* ran radio spots in Washington, D.C., offering to pay any "victims of Bill Clinton" who would step forward and tell their story. And in that same year *Judicial Watch*, headed by Larry Klayman, initiated a suit on behalf of *State Farm Insurance* policyholders, alleging that the company wrongly paid for some of President Clinton's legal bills as a result of a personal liability policy he held. The suit allowed Klayman to depose a number of Clinton administration people and ask about a wide range of topics. Klayman then became a regular guest on a number of talk shows such as *Rivera Live*, where he aired selected portions of the videotaped depositions.

While garnering some support from mainstream conservatives and Republicans, by and large this loosely knit network of conservative foundations, public officials, private citizens, and media organizations operated outside the normal chain of command. This was essentially an insurgency movement that was able to influence the public agenda through newly emerging axes of mediated political power. And though generally failing in more traditional institutional settings (e.g., the courts), they succeeded in influencing the political agenda by exploiting the new media environment through first using the right wing press, then the new media (the Internet, cable talk shows, etc.), and ultimately the mainstream press.[15]

THE "PUBLIC" IN THE NEW MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

The Clinton sex scandals provide a useful example of the blurring line between media outlets and genres, and the challenge this presents for traditional gatekeepers. But this case study raises a number of issues as well. While we think the evidence is strong that the new media environment allowed nonmainstream conservative groups to set the *media's* agenda, its impact on the *public's* agenda is much less obvious. Public opinion polls throughout this period showed remarkably little movement, and much of the movement that did occur was in the direction of *increased* support for the president – exactly the opposite of what traditional agenda-setting, framing, and priming theory would predict (Zaller 1998).[16]

This stability could be interpreted as evidence that in the new media environment, the "public" (collectively and as separate economic, political, and cultural communities) is free to construct its own interpretation of political reality. Opinion surveys and media-market analyses suggest that the public followed the ongoing story (through a variety of media) and knew the central issues and facts. Yet despite the efforts of the President's supporters and detractors to frame the issue, a large majority of the public created their own narrative that was consistent with neither group's interpretation: The president had an affair and lied about it to the public in his deposition and testimony (despite his denials). This affair (and other allegations of sexual misconduct) lowered their estimation of Clinton's already questionable moral character (despite his attempts to salvage his image). At the same time, and in the face of concerted efforts by Clinton's detractors, the public consistently separated this issue from his ability to govern, said that it was ultimately a private matter, and opposed resignation or impeachment, instead favoring either dropping the issue or imposing some form of mild censure. Arguably, the ultimate resolution of the scandal (with the significant exception of the President's impeachment) was closer to the public's preferred outcome than that of either the President or his opponents.

But there is another, less optimistic interpretation of these events and public reaction to them. While Clinton ultimately remained in office, his sexual infidelity (and his opponents' exploitation of this personal failing) shaped a substantial part of the media's agenda for six years and dominated it for another year; led to the impeachment of a popularly

elected president for the first time in U.S. history; and turned both the public's and the government's attention away from other, more substantive issues. And all this was done with maximum media attention and minimal public response. From this perspective, the public's attention to this unfolding drama was no different than it might have been to a particularly engrossing episode of *ER*, *The X-Files*, or *The Jerry Springer Show*. In short, national politics had been reduced to a sometimes amusing, sometimes melodramatic, but seldom relevant spectator sport.[17]

Both of these interpretations of public reaction to the Clinton sex scandals suggest that media events may play a greater role in setting the public agenda than in framing it.[18] But determining whether reaction to such mediated events reflects an autonomous, reasoning public or massive public indifference is crucial to understanding the current and future state of democracy in the United States. We can offer no evidence or argument for reaching such a determination. But we are convinced that the answer lies in developing theories of mediated politics that are more compatible with the fluidities of power emerging from the hyperreal, multiaxial media environment in which we now live. We are also convinced that developing such theories will require abandoning our always artificial, but now almost certainly untenable, assumptions about the distinction between news and entertainment media.

Notes

1. The tendency to distinguish these roles reflects the general failure of liberal–democratic political theory to adequately address the complex relationship between citizenship and consumption (what Miller [1998] calls the consumer-citizen couplet). On this general issue, see Chaps. 5, 6, and 7, by Underwood, Slater, and Gandy, respectively.
2. In this regard we believe that the study of political communication has much to learn from the theoretically rich approaches to these issues found in the cultural studies literature.
3. Debates over the appropriate role of the media, citizens, and elites; attempts to distinguish between fact and opinion; efforts to define high and low culture; and the other issues discussed in this section predate this period, of course. Our point is that the first several decades of the twentieth century were particularly significant in this regard, and shaped much of what we have come to treat as natural in the current mediated political environment.
4. Many of these distinctions were formerly codified in the 1920s through the early 1950s by, among others, the Federal Radio (1927) and Federal Communications (1934) Commissions; professional associations such as the American Society of Newspaper Editors (1922), the National Association of Broadcasters (1923), and

the Newspapers Guild (1933); the privately funded Commission on Freedom of the Press (1947); and codes of conduct created by the movie (1930), radio (1937) and television (1952) industries (Emery and Emery 1988; Peterson 1956).

5. Whether this "merging" of news and entertainment results in an actual change in the form and content of both genres, or simply means that producers and consumers of mediated messages treat this information differently is an empirical question we do not address. Our strong suspicion (based on some initial research) is that the content of the news has increasingly addressed issues of celebrity, culture, and so forth, and presents information in a way that is more self-conciously entertaining. Entertainment media has always directly and indirectly addressed issues of political and social import, so here the difference may be more in how this information is interpreted and used (Delli Carpini and Williams 1994b). We suspect, however, that even ostensibly entertainment genres are more likely (and able, given new technology) to situate their story lines, etc., in real world events and issues.
6. The following discussion of media coverage of the Clinton sex scandals is based on a systematic review of that coverage using *Nexus* and Internet searches, as well as on an in-depth, though somewhat less exhaustive, review of broadcast and cable coverage.
7. The blurring between news and entertainment is exemplified by the fact that the *National Enquirer's* own reputation had been enhanced and begrudgingly acknowledged by members of the mainstream press as a result of its reporting during the O. J. Simpson trial.
8. In this regard, media coverage of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal takes on characteristics of "waves" as developed in Chap. 11, by Wolfsfeld.
9. The concept of a media event has also been used by Dayan and Katz (1994). While the two uses are similar in some ways (and share much in common with Wolfsfeld's notion of "waves" in Chap. 11), there are several important differences. For Fiske, media events provide opportunities for marginalized publics to enter mainstream discourse by using such events to draw attention to their concerns (much as the O. J. Simpson trial or Clarence Thomas–Anita Hill hearings raised broader issues of race and gender). For Dayan and Katz, however, media events have the potential to tap into shared foundational beliefs that can unify seemingly disparate segments of society: while various media may cover the event in different ways, underlying assumptions about the public agenda are *shared* across both outlets and audiences (as with the death of Princess Diana or the explosion of the space shuttle). In our view the Clinton scandals come closer to Fiske's than Dayan's and Katz's type of media event.
10. Of course, the DNA evidence did lead Clinton to finally acknowledge his sexual relationship with Lewinsky, but had little discernible or lasting effect on public opinion. Indeed, in the O. J. Simpson case, the science of DNA testing itself could be challenged by further appeals to science, to beliefs in the corruption or ineptness of the police, and to inherent assumptions of racism, reducing this evidence to the status of opinion at best, and even to "proof" that Mr. Simpson was being set up, and thus was not guilty.
11. Recent attempts by the news media to "police" itself also point to this crisis in defining journalism: for example, the firing of several reporters and columnists at the *Boston Globe* and *Washington Post* for inaccurate reporting, the resignation of a

local newscaster in protest over the hiring of talk show host Jerry Springer, the decision by ABC to not air a docudrama by Oliver Stone about the downing of TWA Flight 800 out of fear that it would confuse viewers, the ongoing criticism of "public journalism" by mainstream members of the press, and so forth.

12. A similar pattern existed for coverage of the Gennifer Flowers scandal, though shorter in duration.
13. One major news organization published what later turned out to be an erroneous story on its Web site. The story was then picked up from the Web site by a competitor, leading the first news organization to reaffirm the story using the second organization's story as confirmation!
14. While in the case of the Clinton sex scandals it was conservative groups outside the mainstream that were best able to exploit the new media environment, we make no claims that this was the only possibility: In other circumstances and certainly for other issues, very different groups could be equally successful.
15. The Republican losses in the 1998 congressional elections, resulting in part from their failed strategy regarding the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal and the subsequent meltdown within the G.O.P. leadership, suggest the extent to which established elites within the party had lost control of their own agenda.
16. But see Keeter (1999) for an argument suggesting that political-science theories of presidential approval may account for this pattern of stability and change.
17. The fact that the public's reaction to charges of sexual *harassment* in the Paula Jones or Katherine Willey cases (or to alleged campaign finance violations by the Clinton-Gore campaign) were similar to those expressed in the Monica Lewinsky case supports this rather pessimistic view. Perhaps more tellingly, the involvement of U.S. military forces in Kosovo could not hold the public's attention at all.
18. Unexplored in this chapter is the impact of the new media environment in the absence of an overriding media event. We suspect that under these quite common circumstances the typical pattern may be a fracturing of the ability of the media or political elites (mainstream or not) to even set an agenda that holds the attention of anything like a majority of the public.

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