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Heeeeeeeeeeeere's Democracy!

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

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Abstract

After two decades of declining news audiences, decreasing newspaper circulation, and increasing uneasiness over the blurring of public-affairs and entertainment media, the heightened ratings for television news in the wake of September's terrorist attacks came as a relief to many observers. Journalists, especially, saw it as reassuring evidence that, when it really mattered, Americans still turned to them.

However, that increased audience has largely dissipated, and even a closer look at the patterns of news-media consumption at the peak of the crisis suggests that journalists are whistling past the graveyard if they conclude that Americans rely on them as much as in the past.

Comments

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Heeeeeeeeeere's Democracy!

By BRUCE A. WILLIAMS and MICHAEL X. DELLI CARPINI

After two decades of declining news audiences, decreasing newspaper circulation, and increasing uneasiness over the blurring of public-affairs and entertainment media, the heightened ratings for television news in the wake of September's terrorist attacks came as a relief to many observers. Journalists, especially, saw it as reassuring evidence that, when it really mattered, Americans still turned to them.

However, that increased audience has largely dissipated, and even a closer look at the patterns of news-media consumption at the peak of the crisis suggests that journalists are whistling past the graveyard if they conclude that Americans rely on them as much as in the past.

According to an ABC News poll taken in November 2001, almost half of all Americans now get some of their news over the Internet, and over a third of them increased their use of online sources after September 11. When seeking out information online, people looked beyond traditional sources. For example, a political-gossip site, the Drudge Report, was the 20th-most-popular destination on the Internet for the week following the terrorist attacks (a record rating for the site), ranking ahead of the online *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *USA Today*. A special episode of the NBC television drama *The West Wing* devoted to the issue of terrorism attracted more than 25 million viewers, its largest audience ever and roughly three times the viewership for the network's evening news.

Over the past several years, we have been involved in a project exploring the impact on democracy of the new media system taking shape in America. The explosion of television channels, the popularity of VCR's and DVD's, and the unlimited number of information venues on the Internet have challenged expectations about the proper sources of political information. If one assumes the distinction between news and entertainment and believes that professional journalists should be the authoritative source for the former, then the new media environment is disconcerting indeed. However, a historical perspective suggests that the distinction itself must be questioned.

The now commonplace notion of news as a distinct category, and the central role of professional journalists as information gatekeepers, emerged in the mid-20th century as a result of factors including the development of mass media such as radio and television, social-science findings that cast doubt on the democratic capacity of the public, and the growing concentration in ownership and control of the media. In what the media columnist Jon Katz has called the "Golden Age of Broadcast News," the assumption was that placing the media's democratic responsibility in the hands of a centralized and professionalized class of experts would result in the dissemination of the trustworthy and sufficient information needed to maintain American democracy.

Over the past two decades, cultural, technological, political, and economic changes have

severely undermined that assumption. For example, a 2000 Pew Charitable Trusts poll found that more than one-third of Americans under 30 now get their news primarily from late-night comedians, and that 79 percent of this age group (and half of the adult population generally) say they sometimes or regularly get political information from comedy programs such as *Saturday Night Live* or nontraditional outlets such as MTV.

Such changes have blurred the distinction between political and nonpolitical media, eroded the gatekeeping and agenda-setting roles of the news media, and challenged the professional bases of modern journalism. While the changes have been regularly noted, scholars and journalists have viewed them from the perspective of the very norms and rules that are under siege. As a result, evidence of declining news audiences and newspaper readers, the substitution of soft for hard news, the increase in reality programming, and so forth have been seen as a crisis of democracy itself. Viewed from a broader historical vantage, however, it is the Golden Age of broadcast news that was exceptional in its attempts to limit politically relevant media to a single genre, news, and a single authority, journalists.

Like it or not, the definition of politically relevant information, and the norms and institutions developed around it during the Golden Age, are no longer tenable. Rather than lament this change, we believe it is more productive to develop a new definition of political communications and a set of normative criteria for assessing them. We offer the following suggestions as a way to begin what should be an expansive public debate over the new role of media in American democracy. Clearly, journalists and scholars have a role to play in this debate, but so, too, do educators, movie producers, television writers, musicians, and other citizens. In short, we think that the new media environment creates new responsibilities for all who hold and heed the expanded media soapbox.

For this debate to be productive, we must stop categorizing politically relevant media by genre (for example, news versus drama), content (fact versus fiction), and source (journalist versus actor). Instead, we should categorize by utility. The extent to which any communication is politically relevant depends on what it does -- its potential use -- rather than on who says it and how it is said. In a democratic polity, politically useful communications are those that shape: (1) the conditions of one's everyday life; (2) the lives of fellow community members; and (3) the norms and structures of power that influence those relationships.

A Jay Leno monologue satirically pointing out the political ignorance of the general public, a scene from *Law & Order* exploring racial injustice in our legal system, an episode of *The Simpsons* lampooning modern campaign tactics, or an Internet joke about Bill Clinton that generates discussion about the line between public and private behavior can be as politically relevant as the nightly news, maybe more so.

While most traditional political news is geared to those with a very narrow notion of politics -- limited almost exclusively to the activities of political elites -- political communication in its broader, democratic sense can appeal to much wider concerns. Which has more impact on our society: an inside-the-Beltway column about

Congressional bargaining over a gay-rights measure, or the coming-out episode of *Ellen*?

Mass democratic communication requires that audiences know who is speaking to them, that as full a range of viewpoints as possible on any topic is represented, that the information presented is truthful, and that this information and the resulting discourse facilitate action. With those factors in mind, we suggest four qualities of the media likely to influence democratic practices: transparency, pluralism, verisimilitude, and practice.

Transparency is akin to the traditional journalistic norms of revealing one's sources, giving a byline, acknowledging when a story involves the economic interests of the media organization, and so forth. Pluralism is related to traditional journalistic values like balance and equal time. Verisimilitude incorporates journalistic concerns about objectivity and accuracy. And practice harks back to a view (largely absent in the Golden Age) of journalists as civic actors and reformers.

While those concepts build on earlier journalistic principles, there are important differences. At a minimum, they must be extended to genres beyond the news. It becomes as important to know Dennis Miller's sources and slants as Dan Rather's, to know the economic interests of a movie studio as well as those of a newspaper chain, to know the sources of a scriptwriter as well as a reporter. It is vital that various viewpoints are represented in films as well as in the daily newspaper, and that producers and writers of a prime-time drama stand ready to defend the truthfulness of the world they present, just as the producers and writers of the evening news should be. Politically relevant entertainment media, just like news media, should help build the skills and provide the opportunities for civic action. Those who create the unremittingly cynical humor of much political comedy, or the consistently negative portrayal of politicians and government in movies or television shows, are as responsible for the dismal state of political participation as are journalists, educators, and politicians themselves.

We intend these concepts to be broader and richer than when they are applied to journalism. For example, pluralism refers less to the viewpoints in any particular genre, broadcast, or text than to the full range of mediated discourse occurring on any particular topic. And verisimilitude is meant to acknowledge the inherent contestability of concepts like truth and objectivity while avoiding the slippery slope of pure relativism. For that reason, we use the word "verisimilitude" not in its meaning as the appearance or illusion of truth (though that definition should always be kept in mind), but rather to suggest the likelihood or probability of truth. As such, it is a term that nods to the uncertainty of things while at the same time affirming the importance of seeking the truth.

So, it is not enough for movies and novels to say only that they are "based on a true story." For politically relevant media, how far and in what ways dramatic license was used must be made much clearer than is currently the norm (as witnessed by a controversy over the invention of a racist cop in the 1999 movie *The Hurricane*, and its playing down of the racism of the criminal-justice system).

Especially important in assessing the democratic potential of the new media environment

is the quality of practice. We mean practice first as the modeling of and preparation for civic engagement. Second, we mean it as actual engagement and participation, a spur to change. Practice was not central to the Golden Age but has always been implicitly (and, in earlier eras, explicitly) at the heart of an independent and diverse press. Indeed, the increased distancing of news professionals from a responsibility to help create engaged citizens was one of the major shortcomings of the media during the Golden Age.

We think that the recent debate over whether ABC was correct to flirt with David Letterman as a replacement for Ted Koppel, while interesting, misses much of what is most important about political communication in the new media environment. From the perspective of encouraging political participation and active civic engagement, neither the elite-dominated coverage of *Nightline* nor the cynicism-driven humor of Letterman has much to offer. In contrast, *Politically Incorrect*, the show following *Nightline*, often demonstrates the possibilities for civil yet entertaining discourse on the issues of the day among a wide variety of experts, nonexperts, celebrities, and ordinary citizens. The intense political pressure from advertisers that the show has come under ever since the host Bill Maher's thoughtful, critical, and unpopular comments following the September 11 attacks is of more democratic concern than the advertising bonanza represented by Letterman or Leno and the lackluster ad dollars threatening Koppel. With respect to the criterion of practice, the loss of *Politically Incorrect* (the show has been canceled) is more troubling than would be the loss of *Nightline*. However, because of our unexamined assumptions about political communication, we tend not to worry about a show that seems more like entertainment than news.

Ultimately, our four criteria are meant to be used by both producers and consumers of politically relevant communications to assess and shape the democratic potential of the emerging media environment. Notions of civic responsibility must apply to all of us, whether in our roles as critical consumers of media, or as the political, cultural, and economic elite who produce politically relevant media in all its forms. In short, they should apply to any individual or organization given access to our expanded public square.

In the end, the challenge is not to recover the authoritative information hierarchies of the past: For better or worse, that battle has been lost. Rather, it is to create a media environment that through transparency, pluralism, verisimilitude, and practice enhances the democratic capacity of citizens. This challenge is not unlike that underlying the debate between John Dewey and Walter Lippmann at the dawn of electronic media, nearly a century ago. At its core remains the issue of the polity's limitations that Lippmann so clearly chronicled -- "the public and its problems," as Dewey called it. Lippmann saw the problem from the perspective of political elites, especially politicians and professional journalists, struggling to manage a deficient public. In contrast, like Dewey, we see this problem as one we all need to confront. In doing so, we may well conclude that the political relevance of a cartoon character like Lisa Simpson is as important as the professional norms of Dan Rather, Tom Brokaw, or Peter Jennings.