

RED *and* BLUE
NATION?

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RED *and* BLUE NATION?

*Characteristics and Causes
of America's Polarized Politics*

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How the Mass Media Divide Us

Diana C. Mutz

The chapters in this book suggest that scholars are nowhere near a consensus on whether the mass public is more polarized than it has been in the past and, if it is, relative to precisely when. Nonetheless, among those who believe the mass public has, indeed, become increasingly polarized in its views, mass media are very likely to be invoked as a cause. Perhaps this should come as no surprise—throughout American history, mass media have been blamed for just about every social ill that has befallen the country.

But in the midst of so much disagreement about when and whether and among whom this phenomenon has occurred, why is there so much agreement that media must somehow be to blame? A consensus on this point exists not so much because the empirical evidence is overwhelming, but because there are multiple theories that predict and explain how media might logically influence levels of mass polarization. Furthermore, it is possible to view mass media as engines of polarization even if one believes the public in general has not become polarized to any significant degree. Mass media are, after all, only one influence in a much larger system of institutions and influences.

For purposes of this chapter, I set aside the question of whether and to what extent mass polarization has occurred, in favor of an exploration of ways in which media have been implicated in polarizing processes. How might mass

media be contributing to this widely decried state of affairs? And even if the public has not polarized, how might mass media nonetheless be encouraging mass opinion in more extreme directions?

More from Which to Choose

One obvious and unmistakable characteristic of the current media landscape is choice. No one questions the idea that there is more choice, that there are more media outlets now than thirty or forty years ago. As political scientist Markus Prior notes in a forthcoming book, television provided a mere seven channels to the average household in 1970, and the three broadcast networks captured 80 percent of all viewing. By 2005, over 85 percent of households had cable or satellite access, and the average viewer had a choice of about a hundred channels. There are now more broadcast networks than in 1970, but they collectively capture only 40 percent of viewing.¹ When one adds to this the choices offered by “new media”—the Internet, cell phones, iPods, and the like—then it seems indisputable that Americans have more media choice than ever before.

There are two different theories that tie increased media choice to higher levels of political polarization. One argument points to the increased number of choices people have in sources of political *news* as a cause of polarization. An altogether different theory suggests that it is the expansion of choices of nonpolitical *entertainment* media content that is most consequential for mass polarization.

Choosing Sources of Political News

Greater choice in sources of political news is relevant to political polarization because it means that people must decide on some basis which sources to use and which not to use. More optimistic scholars have suggested that perhaps this will lead the United States toward a better approximation of a true “marketplace” of ideas, one in which people are exposed to many different perspectives and can weigh a broader range of views in formulating their opinions than was once the case. This idealistic vision is appealing, but for the most part scholars have focused on the other side of this double-edged sword: more choice also means that people can more easily limit their exposure based on their own predispositions.

To the extent that the many sources of political news have identifiable political complexions, some people may end up choosing news sources that reinforce and intensify their preexisting views. In academic jargon, this phenomenon goes by

1. Prior (forthcoming 2007).

the name of “selectivity” or “biased assimilation of information.” Selectivity can take place at several junctures with respect to mass media, including *exposure* to a particular source of political news, *attention* to what the source says, and biased *interpretation* when processing the content of political news. Because exposure to a source of political news is a prerequisite for any of the subsequent kinds of selection to become relevant, selective exposure has been the target of the greatest research attention.

Concerns about selective exposure date back to the very earliest selection studies conducted in the 1940s by Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues at Columbia University.² These early studies became closely linked with psychologist Leon Festinger’s theory of cognitive dissonance.³ Festinger suggested that people want to avoid information that conflicts with their preexisting beliefs, and that they seek out information—through activities such as selective exposure—that confirms their current beliefs. Although a trickle of studies of selective exposure to partisan information continued over the past five decades, a renewed interest in the topic has been spawned by the relatively recent proliferation of news outlets. Moreover, as a result of television programs that now appear more unabashedly partisan, more scholars are finding this hypothesis and its potential polarizing influence worthy of study.

What do these recent studies suggest about whether selective exposure to like-minded political content occurs and thus contributes to a more extreme public? Do people select media content that is compatible with their own views and avoid exposure to alternative opinions? There is, for better or worse, no simple answer to these questions, in part because the internal context of these studies varies, but also because the external context—that is, the media environment—has changed so tremendously since the 1940s, when the hypothesis was formulated.

Studies of the real-world context in which media choices are made tend to support the selective exposure hypothesis, but with important limitations. If one compares the political views promoted by any given medium with the political views held by that medium’s audience, investigators regularly find significant relationships. For example, conservatives are more likely to read conservative newspapers, and liberals are more likely to read liberal ones.

Unfortunately, such correlations are very limited in what they tell us about the public’s propensity to selectively expose itself to political information. Most obviously, it is possible that the partisan leanings of the media sources influenced

2. Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1948).

3. Festinger (1957).

the readers, viewers, or listeners, so that they ended up holding similar political perspectives. In this case, a relationship between the partisanship of a news source and the partisanship of its audience cannot necessarily be attributed to selective exposure. For example, in David Barker's panel study of Rush Limbaugh listeners, he finds that regular listeners developed an antipathy toward Rush Limbaugh's favorite targets, thus suggesting that influence as well as selective exposure was occurring.⁴

Yet another prominent reason that these kinds of relationships are often dismissed is because of the lack of direct evidence that people are actually making choices motivated by a desire to avoid dissimilar perspectives. In their influential review of the literature on both political and nonpolitical forms of selective exposure, David O. Sears and Jonathan L. Freedman suggested that the similarity between audiences' opinions and the opinions of their media sources was because of "de facto selective exposure."⁵ According to this line of thought, a correlation exists between the opinions of an information source and its audience, but not because the audience is motivated to avoid disagreeable views, or because it is influenced by the media. Instead, the correlation arises because media environments tend to supply more like-minded sources of information to the bulk of the populations they reach than they supply dissonant sources. Red states tend to have more conservative newspapers than blue states, but according to the de facto interpretation it is not because Republicans have chosen not to read more liberal newspapers—thus driving them out of business. Instead, they read conservative newspapers because, in conservative regions, they are more widely available than liberal ones.

Of course, a consideration of market forces turns this argument into a bit of a chicken-and-egg debate. For instance, does Provo, Utah, not have any liberal-leaning media because no one there would choose to consume it, or can no one choose it because it is not available there? In their review of the evidence in the 1960s, Sears and Freedman emphasized the latter, suggesting that much of what had been deemed as evidence that audiences were motivated to avoid oppositional political perspectives was really evidence of de facto selective exposure.

However, the preponderance of evidence cited in recent studies confirms that partisan audiences do select media that lean in the direction of their own views. And the evidence of such a relationship is common across virtually all forms of media. Talk-radio listeners are likely to have views similar to those of the host

4. Barker (2002).

5. Sears and Freedman (1967).

whose program they listen to, Republicans are more likely to be viewers of the right-leaning Fox News Channel, and political films such as *Fahrenheit 9/11* are attended primarily by those who are already sympathetic to the films' political perspectives. Likewise, visitors to a candidate's website will predominantly already be the candidate's supporters.⁶ Even when political differences in media are fairly muted, such as when there are two competing daily newspapers in the same city, there is evidence that people systematically choose to read the newspaper with an editorial slant closer to their own politics.⁷ In this case, availability is held constant (making the de facto interpretation moot), providing clear evidence of politically motivated selective exposure.⁸

Although it seems logical to conclude from this that partisans on both sides would, as a result, polarize further in the direction of their original views, this consequence is not yet well documented. Studies of small group interactions have suggested that like-minded company leads to greater attitude extremity, but there is little evidence to date that documents that same process of influence with like-minded mass media.⁹ Moreover, if this process of reinforcement has been taking place all along, why have scholars only begun to suspect selective exposure as a cause of greater polarization in recent years?

Heightened concern about mass media's role in polarization stems from an increase in partisan differences across the many news sources now available to citizens. Selective exposure requires that people associate particular news sources with particular brands of politics. So although it is unlikely that people today are any more selective than they ever were, the media environment itself has made being selective easier than it was in the past, just by offering more diverse sources. Just how much easier selectivity is now remains unclear. Few mainstream news sources bill themselves explicitly as Republican or Democratic in orientation, though increasingly some use terms such as "progressive" and "traditional" to cue their audiences as to what they can expect.

The way in which openly partisan media facilitate selective exposure is abundantly clear when one compares audience patterns in the United States with

6. See Cappella, Turow, and Jamieson (1996); Annenberg Public Policy Center, "Fahrenheit 9/11 Viewers and Limbaugh Listeners about Equal in Size Even Though They Perceive Two Different Nations, Annenberg Data Show," August 3, 2004; Bimber and Davis (2003).

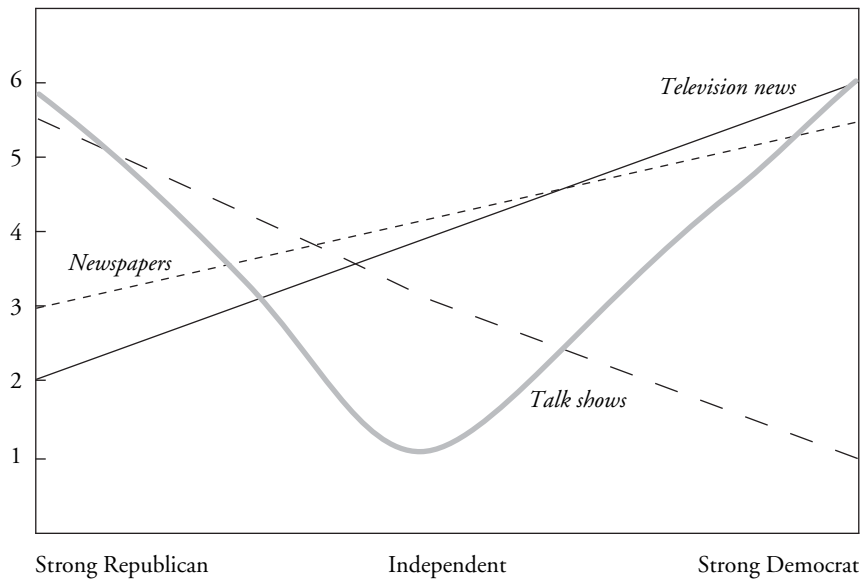
7. Mutz and Martin (2001).

8. Ironically, having a choice of daily newspapers means that readers will be exposed to *fewer* oppositional viewpoints since few people bother to read multiple papers. More voices means more choice, but having choice means that people will pick and choose content that comports with their own viewpoints and thus makes it less likely that they will hear the other side.

9. For a review of the evidence of small group interactions, see Sunstein (2002).

Figure 5-1. *Exposure to Like-minded Media Content by Partisanship and Medium, 1996^a*

Extent of exposure to like-minded content



Source: Based on the data shown in Mutz and Martin (2001, figure 4A).

a. Respondents were asked about their most frequently used source in each category.

those in a country such as Great Britain, where newspapers openly carry partisan labels. In Great Britain, newspaper readers perceive political agreement in their media in roughly the U-shaped pattern shown in figure 5-1. The pattern of newspaper readership in Great Britain demonstrates classic evidence of partisan-based selective exposure (with Conservative and Labour parties replacing Republican and Democrat, respectively). Strong partisans are the most motivated to selectively expose, but weaker partisans also do so to a lesser extent. Partisans can self-select like-minded content at either end of the political spectrum, and thus strong partisans on both sides are exposed primarily to like-minded political perspectives in their newspapers.

In the 1990s, there was limited partisan choice among mainstream daily newspapers in the United States. At least at that time, as shown in figure 5-1, Republicans found their daily newspapers significantly less compatible with their political views than Democrats did. Relative to newspaper readers in Great Britain,

Americans were not as successful at selective exposure. Most Republicans found less to like about the partisanship in television news broadcasts than did Democrats. Not surprisingly, Republicans found talk shows to be highly compatible, whereas Democrats found little to comport with their views on talk shows.¹⁰

Perhaps Americans exercised selective exposure by gravitating to different media (Republicans to talk shows, Democrats to television) rather than finding something politically compatible within each medium. But one wonders how different these patterns would look if the same data were available for 2006. Since the 1990s, Fox News has provided Republicans with a politically compatible television network, and the number of news sources on television and the Internet has proliferated. In addition, the availability of openly partisan television programs, radio shows, and websites may mean that the pattern of U.S. news consumption will more closely approximate that of British newspapers in the not-so-distant future. To the extent that the media environment in the United States continues to develop along the lines of a niche market based on partisanship, this new news environment should facilitate selective exposure by making it easier for people to find the most compatible source of news.

Be that as it may, data demonstrating that selective exposure to media is responsible for mass polarization do not yet exist. Nonetheless, a recent experimental study of Internet news attempted to mimic the kinds of choices people make in today's media environment. Shanto Iyengar and Richard Morin attempted to document evidence of partisan-based selective exposure by randomly assigning a set of news stories to four news sources: Fox News, National Public Radio (NPR), CNN, and the BBC.¹¹ Participants were shown four news story headlines, one under each news organization's logo. Participants were then asked which of the reports they would like to read. This scenario was repeated for articles in six news categories, including American politics, the war in Iraq, race in America, crime, travel, and sports. Some respondents were randomly assigned to a control condition without logos of any kind attached to the stories.

The results suggest that selective exposure is alive and well—even among relatively mainstream news sources. Republicans overwhelmingly preferred stories from Fox News, whereas Democrats divided between NPR and CNN. Democrats systematically avoided Fox News, whereas independents demonstrated no particular pattern of preferences. And while the difference between Republicans

10. Mutz and Martin (2001, pp. 105–07).

11. Shanto Iyengar and Richard Morin, "Red Media, Blue Media: Evidence for a Political Litmus Test in Online News Readership," *Washington Post*, May 3, 2006.

and Democrats was most pronounced when the stories involved hard news (such as national politics and the war in Iraq), it did not disappear entirely even when the story was about possible vacation destinations.

A comparison of how many partisans chose certain stories with news organization labels versus the same stories without labels provides a clear picture of how news sources may serve as a guide to selective exposure. Republicans were three times as likely to choose a news story accompanied by the Fox News logo as without it, and less likely to choose it if it was labeled a CNN or NPR story. Among Democrats the pattern was less pronounced; they were somewhat more likely to choose a story if it was labeled from CNN or NPR and significantly less likely to choose the same story labeled as being from Fox News. As news consumers increasingly have the ability to customize their news environments to their own tastes, the likelihood that news will simply reinforce existing views and produce a subsequent polarization of partisan groups seems all the more plausible.

Relative to much of the twentieth century, the current direction of political news seems to portend greater division rather than greater consensus. But in the midst of considerable alarmism about the impact of modern media, it is worth remembering that during the days of the openly partisan press of the nineteenth century, selective exposure was even easier to accomplish. Newspapers of that era openly aligned themselves with political parties and endorsed candidates on every page, not just in their editorial content.

But even though the question of whether selective exposure exists seems to have been resolved affirmatively, the consequences of selective exposure for public attitudes have not yet been well studied. It is common to assume that if Democrats, Republicans, and independents all exposed themselves to exactly the same information, the public would be less polarized. Perhaps, but some evidence suggests that this would not happen. Macro-level research on selectivity in the processing of political information suggests that even if audiences did experience identical exposure to political information, it might not diminish polarization much because of the selective way in which partisans *interpret* new information.

Imagine a situation in which new information becomes available to all three groups—for example, news that the economy has improved. Assume also that there is a Republican president in office, so that the president's job approval starts out higher among Republicans than among independents, who in turn give the president more favorable job approval ratings than Democrats do. Nonetheless, all three partisan groups in a situation such as this generally increase their levels of presidential approval. In other words, they respond to new information in a

reasonable manner. Likewise, downturns due to bad news such as declining economic indicators would generally cause all three groups' approval levels to fall. According to aggregate data compiled over time, Republicans, Democrats, and independents do indeed respond by changing their views in the same direction—and to roughly the same extent—in response to new information.¹² But this kind of parallel change is not particularly helpful in reducing polarization. If each group moves up or down to roughly the same extent, the gap between Republicans and Democrats remains the same. The two groups are as polarized as before they received new information.

The underlying assumption of much work on information processing is that if people were truly unbiased processors of the same political information, they should ultimately *converge* in their judgments. As new information becomes available (perhaps news that the economy has worsened), partisans update their presidential approval ratings in light of their initial views. The extent of decreased presidential approval due to negative information should not be even across all groups, but should be more pronounced in groups that begin with higher levels of approval. New information matters more when it contradicts initial expectations. In this scenario, new information should logically result, over time, in a convergence of opinion. Whether the news is positive or negative, the three groups' opinions should move closer and closer together.

Empirical data suggest, however, that convergence is not usually what happens. Instead, patterns of aggregate opinion suggest that partisanship is a driving force in how people perceive, interpret, and respond to the political world.¹³ This means that even if selective exposure to information were not a problem, it is doubtful that information from mass media would decrease the gap between the perspectives of Republicans and Democrats. Biased processing is prevalent in the American public, and partisanship is its driving force.

Biased processing models underscore a skepticism prevalent in contemporary political psychology that information is the cure-all for what ails the quality of political decisions. If people are not passive recipients of information, but rather active choosers, interpreters, and rationalizers, then mass media are severely limited in what they can do about political polarization. Even if citizens were still limited to the choice between three indistinguishable network news broadcasts, biased assimilation models would predict that differences would persist because of the ways in which people process the information they receive.

12. Gerber and Green (1999).

13. Bartels (2002).

The Internet has become a particular target of concern with respect to selectivity. Law professor Cass Sunstein, author of *Republic.com*, has suggested that the cacophony of online political voices, including some very extreme ones, raises the possibility that extreme political views will be reinforced and encouraged.¹⁴ Selectivity is made easier on the Internet by search engines and links between websites that espouse similar views. The voices represented on the Internet include those of fringe groups whose extremist ideas would never be covered by more traditional mainstream media. For many, that alone is cause for concern. While it is possible (even likely) that these groups have always been out there, they are more visible and better organized now as a result of the Internet. And even if their numbers have not increased as a result of the Internet, better organization means that they could be more likely to pose a threat by taking violent action of some kind. Still others worry that their mere presence on the Internet encourages those with similar political leanings by reinforcing and exacerbating the extremity of their views, and by convincing them that they are not alone and thus need not abandon their unpopular positions. In all of these scenarios, Internet-based selective exposure is cause for alarm.

Nonetheless, the irony of all of this hand-wringing about the Internet and the expansion in the number of political voices on television should not go without notice. For years, scholars who studied mass media voiced concerns about the near monopolistic media and the paucity of non-mainstream political voices on the air or in print. Today, the marketplace is more—and less—ideal. The proliferation of voices on the Internet means there is a larger marketplace of political ideas than in the past, but that does not necessarily lead citizens to freely sample all of its products.

Choosing Whether to Watch Political News

Partisan-driven selectivity is only one mechanism by which increasing media choice has been tied to increasing polarization. In a more novel argument linking choice and polarization, Markus Prior suggests that greater media choice in the form of *entertainment* content, combined with the availability of twenty-four-hour news channels, has widened the gap between the politically informed and those without interest and information.¹⁵ The rise of cable television has clearly changed contemporary presidents' ability to commandeer the national airwaves, as political scientists Matthew Baum and Samuel Kernell

14. Sunstein (2001).

15. Prior (forthcoming 2007).

have shown.¹⁶ The average size of the audience watching prime-time presidential addresses and news conferences decreased steadily in the late twentieth century—a trend that appears to be primarily a function of the availability of cable television. Likewise, debate watching fell, particularly among cable viewers. People without cable are essentially a captive audience, and their debate watching is less a function of political interest than it is for those with cable, for whom watching the president on television is clearly a choice.

Many of today's television viewers no longer need to suffer through a State of the Union address if they would rather watch a sitcom. In the era of hundreds of channels from which to choose, viewers need not watch the political debates or presidential press conferences that dominated all three networks not so long ago. There is always another—and often far more entertaining—choice for the less politically interested American, from cooking shows to crime dramas to feature films.

The lack of largely involuntary exposure to political content among the less politically involved, according to Prior, makes this group even less likely to turn out to vote than before. (On the other hand, there is a steady diet of political media for political junkies, thus further energizing and reinforcing their proclivities to be politically active.) Thus, changes in the media environment lead to less involuntary exposure to political information and less incidental learning about the political world. This “byproduct learning,” it is argued, is what motivates the less politically interested to turn out to vote. Without it, the increasing gap in political knowledge between the politically interested and uninterested translates into an increasing turnout gap at the polls. Less politically involved, more moderate voters are *less* likely to turn out than before, while the more politically involved are even *more* likely to vote than usual. The electorate is thus robbed of its middle, with the result that the electorate that does go to the polls is more polarized in its views.¹⁷

In light of this long chain of proposed causal influences, Prior's evidence in support of this theory consists of tests of the many links that make up this larger process. Using an experiment embedded in a national survey, he randomly assigned respondents different amounts of choice, asking the hypothetical question, “If you had free time at 6 o'clock at night and the following programs were available, which one would you watch, or would you not watch television then?” Respondents in the low-choice condition were given only five options: the three

16. Baum and Kernell (1999).

17. Notably, this process results in no individual-level shifts in extremity of views, and thus in no polarization at the level of individuals or the mass public. But it produces a compositional shift in the electorate such that the extremes are well represented in voting booths, but the middle, less extreme segments of the population are less likely to be heard.

network news programs, *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, and not watching at all. Respondents in the high-choice condition had those five options, plus several cable news programs and several entertainment options described as “a comedy or sitcom program like *Friends* or *The Simpsons*,” “a drama program like *ER* or *Law and Order*,” and similar examples from other genres including science fiction, reality TV, and sports.

The results of Prior’s tests suggest that in the high-choice condition the news audience is half of what it is in the low-choice condition. To the extent that this hypothetical situation generalizes to real-world changes in U.S. media, this is a striking result. But it also raises the question of why so many people watched the news in the past when it was not what they ideally would have selected. Media economists suggest that they did so out of habit, as well as a tendency to decide to watch television before knowing precisely what the viewing options were. This process no longer rings true for many Americans today. As the ability to “time shift” the viewing of preferred programs becomes more popular, and the degree of choice at any one time becomes still more expansive, it seems unlikely that habitual viewing times will result in much incidental exposure to political content.

A related—and important—matter is whether the politically unenthused really picked up political knowledge from their incidental viewing in the days of less choice. And what about the pre-television era, when the literacy levels of the less educated segments of the population limited their direct access to political information? Prior suggests that during the pre-television era, when media options were largely limited to newspapers and radio, a similar gap existed between the political haves and have-nots, but that television exerted a democratizing influence on the public, making it less effortful for even the less educated to receive political news. The less interested still remained less knowledgeable than in the days before television, but the gap was smaller.

Using National Election Studies data from the 1950s and 1960s, Prior documents how the number of television stations to which an individual had access predicts political knowledge, particularly among the less educated segments of the population. His models suggest that access to television has increased political interest and turnout among the less educated segments of the population.

With the more recent advent of cable television and the Internet, the gap between the politically informed and uninformed should be widening again in the contemporary population. To measure this, Prior develops the concept of “relative entertainment preference”—that is, the extent to which a given respondent prefers entertainment over news. One measure involves directly asking people what genre they like best from a list of ten categories, then having them select a second,

third, and fourth favorite. Of the remaining options, they are allowed to indicate those that they “really dislike.” The respondents who claim to actively dislike news are at the high end of the “relative entertainment preference” scale, while those who indicate neither a like nor a dislike are next highest, and those who rank news among their four favorite types of programs are at the lower end of the scale.

Central to Prior’s thesis is the group he dubs “switchers,” people who will switch from news viewing to entertainment viewing when given the choice. This is the segment of the population whose level of political knowledge (and level of turnout at the polls) should be most affected by greater choice. Because switchers abandon news once they have a choice of entertainment content, they reduce their incidental exposure to political content, which in turn limits their accidental political learning.

Prior’s thesis presents a conundrum for a society that is addicted to choice. Some segments of the population will expose themselves to political news voluntarily and turn out to vote regularly regardless of the shape of the current news environment. Others will not watch political news regardless of how little choice they have, and they are unlikely to bother voting in any case. But for those on the margins of these groups—those who are not political activists, yet not totally disengaged—incidental exposure to the political world is an important way in which they are drawn into the political process. Without involuntary exposure to political media, these more moderate voters will drop out of the electoral process, and the voting public will be increasingly extreme in its composition.

Losers’ Consent in an Age of Illegitimacy

Yet another way in which media may contribute to political polarization stems from the nature of contemporary media content during elections. It has been often observed, extensively documented, and widely lamented that election coverage tends to emphasize the “behind-the-scenes” insider perspective on what drives election outcomes. Rather than emphasize the substantive reasons why voters might have selected one candidate over another, media coverage tends to emphasize the role of political consultants, advertising campaigns, and other factors that have less to do with the quality of the candidate or the extent to which aspects of his agenda resonate with voters, and more to do with strategic aspects of how campaigns are waged.

In his book *Out of Order*, Thomas E. Patterson documented the stark increase in this type of coverage from the 1960s through the 1990s.¹⁸ Patterson’s analysis

18. Patterson (1993).

shows that it is not simply that horse-race coverage—that is, coverage of who is ahead and who is falling behind—remains popular among journalists. (Indeed, many argue that horse-race coverage is a time-honored journalistic tradition that predates both polls and television.)¹⁹ But in comparison with forty or fifty years ago, there is now far more of what Patterson calls “game-centered” coverage of elections, in which journalists focus on the suspense and speculation about likely winners and losers and the behind-the-scenes machinations of candidates and their staffs. As Patterson notes:

The game schema dominates the journalist’s outlook in part because it conforms to the conventions of the news process. . . . The conventions of news reporting include an emphasis on the more dramatic and controversial aspects of politics. . . . The game is always moving: candidates are continually adjusting to the dynamics of the race and their position in it. Since it can almost always be assumed that the candidates are driven by a desire to win, their actions can hence be interpreted as an effort to acquire votes. The game is thus a perpetually reliable source of new material.²⁰

Patterson’s analysis of *New York Times* coverage between 1960 and 1992 demonstrates that in 1960 the majority of election stories were framed as stories about candidates’ policy positions. By 1992, election stories were six times more likely to be framed in the context of campaign strategy than as policy stories. Over the course of several decades, stories about candidates’ policy positions were replaced by an increasing number of articles about the campaigns themselves.

In what comes across as an effort to give ordinary people a behind-the-scenes perspective on how elections are run, today’s election coverage is replete with analyses of the strategic decisions involved in campaigning for office. When a presidential candidate gives a speech about health care in Atlanta, campaign journalists are likely to frame the event not in terms of a discussion of health care policy or the candidate’s platform, but as an effort to woo southern voters. For reporters—and perhaps for their audiences as well—the text is not nearly as interesting as the subtext.

Some speculate that journalists highlight the strategic aspects of campaigns as a means of insulating their readers and viewers from the more manipulative aspects of campaigns; if audiences are aware of candidates’ real intentions and the reasons for their actions, then surely they will not be duped by them. In his book *Seducing America*, Roderick P. Hart has suggested that strategic coverage is

19. Sigelman and Bullock (1991).

20. Patterson (1993, pp. 60–61).

popular with the public because it gives them the illusion of being informed and knowing what is *really* happening in the campaign.²¹

The problem with constant reporting on the campaign is that it suggests to news media audiences that being persuaded by a politician is a bad thing, a sign of weakness, gullibility, or stupidity. For the same reason that no one admits to having his or her mind changed by a political ad, few Americans see open-mindedness to campaign propaganda as a good thing. Another problem with game-centric coverage is that it shifts the audience's attention away from what is being said (on health care, for example) toward the journalist's perspective on the strategic reason *why* it is being said.

From the perspective of polarization, why is the rise in this kind of coverage a concern? The link to polarization comes later in the election process, after the winners and losers have already been decided. To the extent that citizens are convinced by game-centric coverage that elections are won or lost by the right choice of advertisements, a new haircut, the best speechwriters, or the cleverest consultants, one could understand why voters on the losing side in any given contest might feel they have been robbed. The best advertisements do not necessarily mean the best presidents, and a good haircut seldom leads to good governance. Moreover, a good campaign can be waged by a weak candidate, and a bad campaign by a strong candidate.

It is a much more polarizing experience to think that one's candidate lost an election because of a minor misstatement, a failure to look good on television, or a failure to hire the right advertising agency than to think that he lost because his policy ideas were less popular than his opponent's. If electoral victories are, according to the press, about the candidate's ability to play the game, then electoral losses also are about the candidate's failure to play the game well.

Empirical evidence backs up this broad argument, though scholars have yet to test the multiple steps in this process within a single study. For example, there is considerable empirical evidence of the media's increased emphasis on the strategic aspects of campaigns. A separate body of evidence suggests that the explanations the mass media put forth for how an election was won or lost are widely adopted by the public. Today's media coverage is more likely to suggest apolitical, illegitimate explanations for a candidate's electoral victory, and the public on the losing side is likely to believe them.²² A belief that one's side has experienced an illegitimate loss, in turn, prompts the losing partisans to become increasingly angry

21. Hart (1999, pp. 77–100).

22. See Mutz (1993); Hershey (1992).

and frustrated. If one believes the other side won by running deceitful ads, then it is easy to villainize the opposition and thus create more extreme perceptions of the consequences of one political choice over another. At this point, it is no longer about differing political philosophies; it is about right versus wrong, truth versus deceit, good versus evil.

The link in this chain of events that has not been well documented is the extent to which delegitimizing explanations lead to more polarized views, particularly in the form of an intensified dislike for the “other side.” In a 2005 book, *Losers’ Consent*, Christopher J. Anderson and his coauthors examine the role that elections play in legitimizing their own outcomes. For citizens who end up on the winning side in a given contest, accepting the outcome is not particularly difficult. But what produces consent from the losers? Not surprisingly, those who participate in an election but end up on the losing side are significantly more negative about their system of government. Losing naturally leads to anger, particularly if the loss is seen as illegitimate—and evaluations of the legitimacy of elections and democracy are significantly less positive among losers than among winners.²³

Although it has yet to be tested, one would likewise expect that those exposed to media coverage that emphasizes delegitimizing explanations of an election outcome—such as the idea that the election was won primarily by ads containing lies or half-truths—should come away from the experience of loss more polarized in their views. Nobody wants to end up on the losing side, but losing to an opponent who won for the wrong reasons would be expected to create much more negative feeling toward the opposition.

By suggesting this, I do not mean to refer specifically to the unusual, extremely close election outcomes that occurred in the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections, though they obviously come to mind. The more general point is that regardless of how lopsided an outcome might be, media coverage plays an important role in structuring explanations for why one side was victorious and the other side failed. Once the people have spoken, it is the mass media that decide what they have said. To the extent that delegitimizing explanations are encouraged by the press and adopted by the losing side, a more polarized electorate is likely to be the result.

Media Bracketing of Acceptable Opinion

Yet another explanation linking the media to political polarization originates in two studies of the role of the news media as a political institution. In a 1984

23. Anderson and others (2005).

study, political scientist Dan Hallin examined the oft-repeated assertion that during the war in Vietnam the American news media (television in particular) became more oppositional toward government and thus helped lead public opinion away from support for the war. In Hallin's study of political elites, media coverage, and mass opinion, he found little support for this thesis of an oppositional media. Although media coverage of the war did become increasingly critical after the Tet Offensive in 1967, Hallin demonstrated that this was because elite opinion became more divided on the war at that time. By relying on elite sources, reporters mirrored the division of elite opinion—and subsequently their coverage influenced the range of opinions held by the mainstream public as well.²⁴

Hallin's study pointed to the importance of the mass media in "bracketing" the range of acceptable opinion for the public. By defining the boundaries of acceptable controversy, the media define the range of legitimate opinions that the public may adopt. An issue such as Vietnam may shift over time from the sphere of consensus to the sphere of legitimate controversy, but this is a top-down phenomenon originating with elites rather than with the media. Others have similarly noted that media coverage tends to be "indexed" to the range of elite opinion rather than more broadly to the range of mass opinion.²⁵

When members of Congress represent some of the more extreme positions (as they do now), it follows then, as a result of journalists' tendency to rely on official sources, that those more extreme viewpoints are also more likely to be covered by the press. Although the views that are covered originate with elites (such as members of Congress), the media play an important role in conferring legitimacy on a given range of views simply by covering those perspectives regularly, but not others. What this process suggests is that by covering what is essentially a more polarized group of political elites, journalists may be offering a wider range of acceptable views to the public and thus discouraging consensus. If the smorgasbord of views offered in today's media represents greater extremes than in the past, then it is perhaps not surprising that more of the public now endorses more extreme views.

This "indexing" or "bracketing" hypothesis has been relatively well documented in terms of the effects that political elites have on the range of views reported in mainstream media. But the impact of indexing on the mass public within those media audiences is less well studied. By simply broadening the range of views

24. Hallin (1984).

25. The use of "indexing" in this context was coined by Bennett (1990).

they present, does media coverage also produce a public with more diverse views? The jury is still out with respect to the impact on the public.

To the extent that this mechanism of polarization holds true, it suggests that perhaps the media critics of the previous generation should have been more careful about what they wished for. In a paradoxical way, longtime critics of the lack of diversity in media and the lack of representation for more extreme voices have seen the change they desired: there is no question that today's media carry a broader range of political perspectives than they did a generation ago. But the very diversity of those same voices may encourage the public to adopt more polar positions—an unforeseen and less desirable consequence of a more vibrant marketplace of political ideas.

In-Your-Face Politics: Gut Reactions to Televised Incivility

“Shout-show” television has been the target of a tremendous amount of criticism from many quarters, academic and otherwise. The world of political disagreement as witnessed through the lens of political talk shows is quite polarized. Increased competition for audiences has led many programs on political topics to liven themselves up in order to increase audience size.²⁶ Thus, political talk shows such as *The McLaughlin Group*, *The O'Reilly Factor*, *Meet the Press*, *Capital Gang*, *Hardball*, and many others tend to involve particularly intense and heated exchanges.

The issue of contentiousness and incivility in political discourse was brought to a head in October 2004, when *Daily Show* host Jon Stewart appeared on *Crossfire* and openly criticized this program (and others like it) for its “partisan hackery,” which Stewart said was “hurting America.” Is there any truth to Stewart's claim? Aside from the obvious distastefulness some find in watching politicians scream, yell, and interrupt one another for thirty minutes or more, how is this kind of in-your-face politics implicated as a potential cause of mass polarization?

The tendency on television is to highlight more emotionally extreme and less polite expressions of opinion, and research suggests that these expressions of incivility may have important consequences for attitudes toward the opposition. These consequences flow from the fact that politeness and civility are more than mere social norms; they are means of demonstrating mutual respect.²⁷ In other words, uncivil discourse increases polarization by helping partisans think even less of their opponents than they already did.

26. Fallows (1996).

27. This is a point made in Kingwell (1995).

And yet market forces seem to favor the kind of television that encourages polarization. Polarized political discourse and an angry opposition makes for compelling television. Viewers may claim that they find it disgusting, but they cannot help watching—just as passing motorists cannot help “rubbernecking” when there is an accident alongside the highway. It is not that people actually *enjoy* what they are seeing, but there is something about information of this kind—information about life and death, about conflict and warring tribes in a dispute—that makes it difficult to ignore. Evolutionary psychologists have pointed to the adaptive advantage of having brains that automatically pay attention to conflict as a means of staying alive in an earlier era. At a cognitive level, of course, no one really expects to be caught in the “crossfire” of a televised partisan shout-fest. But even when it is “only television,” and thus poses no real threat of bodily harm, people cannot help but watch and react to incivility.

My own research suggests that psychologists are correct about the demands of incivility on human attentional processes. To examine the difference that incivility makes independent of political content, I produced a mock political talk show—on a professional television set using professional actors as congressional candidates. The candidates espoused the same issue positions and made exactly the same arguments for and against various issue positions in two different versions of the program. In one discussion, however, they raised their voices, rolled their eyes, and engaged in an impolite, uncivil exchange. In the civil version of the program, they spoke calmly, refrained from interrupting one another, and showed mutual respect simply by obeying the social norms for polite discourse.²⁸

The differences in viewer reactions to the two programs were startling. The group randomly assigned to the uncivil version of the political discussion came away with roughly the same feelings toward their preferred candidate as those in the civil group. But attitudes toward the “other side” became much more intensely negative when the two exchanged views in an uncivil manner. The more dramatic, uncivil exchanges encouraged a more black-and-white view of the world: their candidate was not just the best; the alternative was downright evil.

This effect was evident for partisans on both sides of the political spectrum and regardless of which candidate they liked best. Interestingly, watching the uncivil version led to greater polarization in perceptions of “us” versus “them,” relative to a control group, but watching the civil version of the exchange led to *decreased* levels of polarization. This pattern of findings suggests that political television has the potential to *improve* as well as to exacerbate the divide among

28. Mutz and Reeves (2005).

partisans of opposing views; it simply depends upon how those differences of opinion are aired. When differences of opinion are conveyed in a manner that suggests mutual respect, viewers are able to understand and process the rationales on the other side and are less likely to see the opposition in starkly negative terms. Differences of opinion are perceived as having some legitimate and reasonable basis. But when those same views and rationales are expressed in an uncivil manner, people respond with an emotional, gut-level reaction, rejecting the opposition as unfairly and viciously attacking one's cherished views.

Using indicators of physiological response, my studies also demonstrate that televised incivility causes viewers' levels of emotional arousal to increase, just as they do when people encounter face-to-face incivility. In the face of real-world conflict, this reaction supposedly serves a functional purpose—participants are given the rush of adrenaline they may need to flee the situation. But with televised incivility, this kind of reaction serves no purpose; it is simply a remnant of brains that have not adapted to twentieth-century representational technology.²⁹

Even though viewers are just third-party observers of other people's conflicts on television, they show heightened levels of emotional arousal, just as people do when encountering face-to-face disagreement. This is not so surprising if one considers how it feels to be a third-party observer of a couple's argument at a dinner party. The same discomfort, awkwardness, and tension exist, even for those not directly involved in the conflict. Likewise, when political commentator Robert Novak stormed off the set of a live broadcast of CNN's *Inside Politics* in August 2004, viewers were uncomfortable—and they paid attention. The tension was palpable to viewers, even though few may be able to remember what the substance of the conflict was.

The heightened arousal produced by incivility can make it difficult to process the substance of the exchange. Some arousal helps to call attention to what otherwise might be considered bland and uninteresting. But at extremely high levels of arousal, people will remember only the emotional content of the program (who screamed at whom, who stomped off in a pique) and recall little of the substance of the disagreement. As anyone who has ever had an argument knows, there is a point at which the emotional content of the exchange overwhelms any potential for rational discourse. As a result, viewers gain little understanding of the other side. They perceive their own side of the debate as unfairly attacked, and thus the incivility their own candidate displays is simply an appropriate level of righteous indignation in reaction to an unprovoked attack. The incivility

29. Reeves and Nass (1996).

demonstrated by the opponent demonstrates that he is a raving lunatic, wholly unfit for office.

In addition to this disdain for the opposing side, incivility produces a second important reaction—heightened attention. As Bill O'Reilly, host of *The O'Reilly Factor*, suggests, "If a radio producer can find someone who eggs on conservative listeners to spout off and prods liberals into shouting back, he's got a hit show. The best host is the guy or gal who can get the most listeners extremely annoyed—over and over and over again."³⁰ Evidently, these sorts of shows have hooked Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.), who indicated that she and her husband Bill now have TiVo, a technology that allows a viewer to record and replay television programs. And for what purpose do the senator and the former president use TiVo? According to Senator Clinton, they use it to record the most outrageous statements made by their political opponents so they can play them over and over and yell back at the television.³¹ An optimist might regard this vignette as an example of how viewers are *not* necessarily selectively exposing themselves to politically compatible media. But the pessimist would undoubtedly point out that yet another media mechanism of polarization has kicked in to take its place. Uncivil political discourse that produces such strong emotional reactions is unlikely to further the cause of political moderation.

Controlled laboratory studies suggest, for better or worse, that O'Reilly is correct: incivility is extremely entertaining and people like to watch it, even if it is just to scream back. Despite the fact that many viewers claim to be repulsed by it, the respondents who viewed the identical but uncivil version of the same program always rated it as more entertaining, found it more exciting to watch, and indicated a greater desire to see the uncivil program again than the civil version.³² Polite conversation is boring, and the deliberative ideal for political discourse makes for dull television. "I acknowledge there are some good points on my opponent's side" will probably never make good television, whereas "These evil people must be stopped!" always will.

With these findings in mind, it is important to consider the extent to which the rise of televised political incivility can help explain mass polarization. Is political discourse truly any more uncivil now than in the past? Some have suggested that the United States is in the midst of a "civility crisis" in its public life.

30. O'Reilly (2000, p. 52).

31. Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, speech at the Doherty-Granoff Forum on Women Leaders, Brown University, April 8, 2006.

32. Mutz and Reeves (2005).

As then University of Pennsylvania president Judith Rodin argued in 1996, “Across America and increasingly around the world, from campuses to the halls of Congress, to talk radio and network TV, social and political life seem dominated today by incivility. . . . No one seems to question the premise that political debate has become too extreme, too confrontational, too coarse.”³³ Similar calls for greater civility in political discourse have come from a wide array of scholars, as well as from philanthropic organizations.

Some scholars concur that incivility is on the rise. Political scientist Eric M. Uslaner, for example, has suggested that members of Congress are increasingly likely to violate norms of politeness in their discourse.³⁴ Linguist Deborah Tannen has characterized the United States as having “a culture of argument” that encourages “a pervasive warlike atmosphere” for resolving differences of opinion.³⁵ Even journalists concur that “hyperbole and venomous invective have become the order of the day” in American politics.³⁶

Clearly, there is a widespread perception that political discourse is much more uncivil now than in the past, but there is little historical evidence to confirm such a trend. As then senator Zell Miller (D-Ga.) implied when he wistfully said he would like to challenge *Hardball* host Chris Matthews to a duel, violence among political opponents was once far more common than it is now. Senator Miller’s statement was made during an uncivil exchange between himself and a journalist during the 2004 Republican National Convention. It made headlines, precisely because the idea of using weapons to resolve political differences seemed absurd. We have not had a duel to the death among politicians for many years, and thus one could easily characterize today’s political talk shows as mild by comparison.

So is it fair to say that incivility is on the rise in political discourse? There is no definitive answer to this question, but the increased *visibility* of uncivil conflicts on television seems indisputable. Although politicians of past eras may frequently have exchanged harsh words, without television cameras there to record these events and to replay them for a mass audience their impact on public perceptions was probably substantially lower. The dominance of television as a source of exposure to politics suggests that public exposure to uncivil political discourse has

33. Judith Rodin, speech at the Penn National Commission on Society, Culture, and Community, December 9, 1996 (www.upenn.edu/pnc/pubkeynote.html).

34. Uslaner (1993).

35. Tannen (1998).

36. Michiko Kakutani, “Polarization of National Dialogue Mirrors Extremists of Left and Right,” *New York Times*, November 26, 2000.

increased. Moreover, it is one thing to read about political pundits' or candidates' contrary views in the press, and quite another to witness them directly engaged in vituperative argument. The sensory realism of television conveys a sense of intimacy with political actors that people were unlikely to encounter in the past, even among the few lucky enough to have face-to-face meetings.

Television provides a uniquely intimate perspective on conflict. In the literature on human proxemics, the distance deemed appropriate for face-to-face interactions with public figures in American culture is more than twelve feet.³⁷ Yet exposure to politicians on television gives the appearance of being much closer. When people are arguing, the tendency is to back off and put greater space between those who disagree. Instead, when political conflicts flare up on television, cameras tend to go in for tighter and tighter close-ups. This creates an intense experience for the viewers, one in which they view conflict from an unusually intimate perspective. Political scientist Jane J. Mansbridge has noted that when open political conflict occurs in real life, bringing people together in one another's presence can intensify their anger and aggression.³⁸ To the extent that a television presence has similar effects, incivility is likely to encourage polarization.

What Are the Prospects?

In thinking about the prospects for the future, it is useful to consider separately and collectively the four mechanisms by which the media may be involved in the polarization of the mass public. Two of these mechanisms, discouraging losers' consent and bracketing the range of acceptable opinion, are driven by the content of news media. In one case, journalists' game-centric coverage of campaigns is implicated, and in the other, the diversity of political voices affects the range of mass opinion. The other two mechanisms are driven more or less by technological change. Because of the proliferation of channels on cable television, along with the development of the Internet, most Americans have access to more partisan political voices than they ever did before. Whether through partisan-based selective exposure, or through selective avoidance of political content altogether, the distribution of opinion in the electorate has changed. Finally, the ability of television to present an unnatural "in-your-face" perspective on politicians may have further increased levels of vitriol directed toward the opposition.

37. Aiello (1987).

38. Mansbridge (1983).

How likely is it that these processes will change? Theoretically, the mechanisms based on media content could become less tenable if journalistic norms were to change. For example, if not only *Crossfire* were taken off the air, but also every other uncivil shout-fest show that involves politics, then one could see how this polarizing mechanism might abate in significance. Likewise, if campaign coverage were to shift away from its predominantly strategic angle and focus instead on taking political statements at face value, one could imagine losers who would be less angry about the opposition's victory, particularly if it were deemed to result from legitimate differences of opinion. There are several problems with such proposed changes, of course. Even if they were possible to implement (which they are not), it seems unlikely that they would offer tenable solutions or even modest improvements on the current situation.

News is commerce, to be sure. What all four of the mechanisms described in this chapter share is a tension between drawing viewers, readers, and listeners to political media, and producing media content that does not encourage polarized political perspectives. The goal of niche marketing and the extent of choice is to give viewers more of what they want, but not necessarily more of what they need. Likewise, the game-centric, campaign-oriented journalism that is so common today exists because viewers and readers find such discussions of interest. The greater publicity that extreme views now receive probably also helps draw larger audiences. It is far more dramatic to show starkly opposed foes engaged in battle than to illustrate the political world with two moderates calmly discussing their small differences. If it were not for the need to make politics more interesting for marginally politically involved viewers, then it is doubtful that there would be a need for confrontational shout shows to exist either.

Moreover, any changes to media content designed to alleviate the impact of one of these mechanisms are likely to replace one mechanism of media polarization with another. Take, for example, the incivility that is so prevalent in political talk shows. What would happen if producers were to tone down these programs so that levels of civility approached the norms of everyday people in their social interactions? On the one hand, viewers would not have the chance to intensify their dislike for the opposition by viewing uncivil repartee. But on the other hand, in-your-face incivility is precisely what people like about these shows. In study after study, even those who responded negatively to incivility reported that the uncivil shows were more interesting and exciting to watch. Those exposed to the civil versions of the same show were far less likely to indicate any interest in seeing it again or in watching it regularly. As a result, in a hypothetical era of civil political television, those viewers would be unlikely to watch at all.

They would fall into the category of viewers that Prior refers to as “switchers”—people who would switch to entertainment when given a choice—and thus fall out of the reach of political information altogether.

Three general approaches to improving this situation are possible. The first is to push for less commercial pressure. In *Breaking the News*, James Fallows excoriates his fellow journalists for turning news coverage into more of an effort to entertain than to edify. He faults the focus of media companies on their bottom lines as the source of the corruption of news.³⁹ From a broader perspective, however, it seems too facile to claim that the commercial interests of U.S. media companies are to blame. What Fallows misses is that even if all political content were government-funded, the lack of commercial pressures would not alleviate the need to attract audiences to political content. In order to do good or harm, political news must have large audiences; high-minded programs with small audiences are hardly better than no programs at all.

A second, equally fruitless, approach has been to wag fingers accusingly at the civically bankrupt American public. Why is it, many ask, that Americans do not take their civic duty more seriously and educate themselves on political issues?

A third option is to change the shape of political media so that they can draw audiences without inadvertently polarizing the public. Traditional television news programs are in a state of turmoil these days over which direction to take. Do they reinvent themselves to become more like entertainment programs and vie for audiences on the edge of political interest? Or do they take the so-called high road and remain serious and hard-hitting? The problem with the high road is that even if it leads to critical acclaim and journalistic respect, it is unlikely to draw in the politically marginal audiences who prefer to watch entertainment. By many normative accounts, doing the “right thing” would result in precisely the wrong effect—further chipping away at the proportion of Americans who expose themselves to politically relevant television content.

In a 2005 interview, CBS chairman Leslie Moonves indicated just how drastically he thinks traditional news broadcasts must be revamped in order to increase audiences and survive. “We have to break the mold,” he stated. The alternatives Moonves has considered include mold-breaking formats ranging from the comedy of Jon Stewart’s mock news program, *The Daily Show*, to the zany humor of England’s *The Big Breakfast*, to Canada’s *Naked News*, during which anchors present a newscast while doing a striptease.⁴⁰

39. Fallows (1996).

40. Lynn Hirschberg, “Giving Them What They Want,” *New York Times Magazine*, September 4, 2005.

These solutions—comedy and sex—are only two of many possible alternative attention-generating mechanisms. But those pursuing the solution need to move away from the premise that commercial pressures alone are responsible and realize that this is a problem that has been faced before, albeit in very different contexts. Children’s television, for example, was once widely bemoaned as antisocial in its consequences. Kids were particularly drawn to highly arousing, violent programs—precisely the kind of content most feared by parents. Yet through collaborations with researchers, organizations such as the Children’s Television Workshop were able to draw on knowledge of human behavior to come up with alternative means of grabbing children’s attention. The early evidence on entertainment-oriented news programs is promising in demonstrating that audiences do learn something about politics from their content.⁴¹ While it is not unreasonable to be optimistic that answers will be found, it seems foolhardy at this point to try to predict the future of political media.

The underlying question that still needs to be confronted—by scholars as well as those in the media business—is how to make a topic that is not inherently interesting to many Americans nonetheless exciting to watch. And if the answer is not behind-the-scenes coverage of election strategy, or mudslinging on political talk shows, or partisan extremists rallying the troops, then what will keep those politically marginal citizens from watching movies on cable instead?

41. Baum (2003).