

NE

WWS

THE POLITICS OF ILLUSION

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1

NEWS IN A CHANGING INFORMATION SYSTEM

Over the past two decades, economic, cultural, political and technological changes have challenged the stability of the existing media regime . . . raising questions such as the relative merits of *Saturday Night Live*, *CBS Evening News*, Fox News, Twitter, Facebook, the *Huffington Post*, and the *New York Times* as sources of political information.

—Bruce A. Williams and Michael X. Delli Carpini¹

I don't know anything about the newspaper business. . . . I went through a few gates before deciding to buy The [Washington] Post. Is it hopeless? I didn't want to do it if it was. The Internet has radically disrupted traditional newspapers. The world is completely changed.

—Jeff Bezos²

Around the time the first web browsers sparked the Internet boom of the 1990s, Nicholas Negroponte envisioned the coming of a virtual news experience that he termed The Daily Me.³ As the name implies, such an information system delivers what each of us wants to know about, when, where, and how we like it. Negroponte, a founder of the MIT Media Lab, called the old mass media system The Daily Us because it brought people in society together around pretty much the same reporting of common problems, threats, and triumphs (and still does when something really big happens). We now live with both media systems in play. People born after 1980 have been termed “digital natives”⁴ because they have or will come of age in a highly personalized digital media environment. These digital generations are more likely to experience The Daily Me, as they get information through Facebook and Twitter and by surfing the web. Many other citizens live comfortably within both information systems, combining personalized online sources with what we now call “legacy” news sources such as TV, radio, and daily papers. Meanwhile, another segment of citizens (primarily those over 55) live mainly with The Daily Us of newspapers and broadcast news—but the size of that “us” is shrinking, as the legacy media

generation grows older. While we are not likely to see the legacy news media disappear, the dominance of that system is being challenged by new forms of content production and distribution that involve more audience participation and even bypass traditional journalism in content creation. A source of friction at the interface of these two systems is that much of the serious news that continues to circulate through the digital sphere is produced by legacy news organizations that are having trouble generating revenues as advertising money follows prime younger demographics online.

As these changes play out, the emerging information order still retains some echoes of what we once thought of as news: *important information delivered in timely fashion to people who want to know it*. Yet more information is automated, digested by machines, and delivered through highly personalized channels. Consider, for example, how the reader of this book may encounter important local news in the not too distant future:

Jan is in her self-driving car on her way to a meeting in a city nearby, when a severe thunderstorm hits her hometown, spawning a small tornado. Jan's smartwatch issues a storm warning, then alerts her that her daughter's school is in lockdown. The smartwatch asks Jan if she wants more details. "Yes, neighborhood news," Jan replies. "Car display." . . . Real-time posts from her neighborhood appear with details of damage and with photos. Jan's house sends a message that the power is out. A request for a map of her town shows the path and real-time location of the tornado. It also shows which neighborhoods have power and which schools are locked down. Road closures and traffic jams appear as red lines.⁵

The information in this scenario seems intuitively like news, in that it is timely and important. However, this information is produced and distributed largely by machines, not journalists and news organizations. Even in this simple weather scenario, it is not clear how people would learn what public officials are doing or whether their response seems adequate. Many local news organizations that would report such political information are struggling to stay in business as audiences migrate to an array of digital information sources. The advertising dollars that once supported local news media are flowing to digital platforms such as Google that target consumers in more refined and personalized ways.

As journalism organizations struggle to find stable niches within this complex information environment, many critics worry that the quality of reporting is deteriorating, contributing to the growing numbers of citizens who have stopped following news produced by conventional journalism

organizations.⁶ Among those who continue to use legacy news sources, the average time spent each day on those sources declines dramatically across each generation from retirees to young adults.⁷ As the balance tips toward The Daily Me, social media sites are increasingly popular as news feeds, with some 30 percent of the public getting news from Facebook. Compared to people who go directly to an online news site, those referred by Facebook spend only one-quarter as much time on each story, while encountering just one-sixth as many total stories. Entertainment is the most popular type of news on Facebook, favored by 73 percent of the site's news seekers. National political news comes in fourth, regularly encountered by 55 percent of the Facebook news audience, while international news comes in ninth at 39 percent.⁸ In addition to providing a sketchy impression of the day's events, social media news feeds enable people to select their own versions of just the topics that interest them, resulting in scattered public attention mixed with polarization of views on critical problems.⁹

Will publics in this mixed information environment be less in the know, more polarized, and less able to come together to decide what to do about important issues? Motivated by these concerns, many communication scholars and journalists lament the decline of *traditional news based on investigations by journalists and distributed by news organizations as what citizens need to know about their world*. Meanwhile, others argue that the legacy news media have seldom lived up to the watchdog journalism ideal of holding officials accountable. Besides, there is so much information available online that it is easy to become informed if one really cares. But how do we establish the accuracy of much of what passes for political information online? Or, is The Daily Me based on what people want to believe, making facts and evidence less important?

No matter where one falls in these controversies, one thing is clear: we will not return to anything like the mass media news system and its large "captive audience" of the last century.¹⁰ The legacy news organizations that anchored that system have suffered a number of shocks that include competition from an explosion of mobile apps and specialized online platforms that growing numbers of people find more in tune with their lifestyles. When people share the information that pulses through their devices, they often edit and add commentary to help it travel over particular social networks. This involvement of audiences in producing and distributing information changes the neat *one-to-many* communication logic that defined the mass media era. Social media employ a *many-to-many* logic that involves people more interactively in the communication process. Jay

Rosen has argued that this shift is so significant that we need a new terminology for “the people formerly known as the audience.” He even published a mythical manifesto from them telling the mass media people:

You don’t own the eyeballs. You don’t own the press, which is now divided into pro and amateur zones. You don’t control production on the new platform, which isn’t one-way. There’s a new balance of power between you and us.

The people formerly known as the audience are simply *the public* made realer, less fictional, more able, less predictable. You should welcome that, media people. But whether you do or not, we want you to know we’re here.¹¹

During such a time of change, it is best to resist defining news as only that content produced by journalists and formal news organizations. Bruce Williams and Michael Delli Carpini propose a set of grounding questions that point us beyond the changing world of journalism in thinking about the political role of information media: “Do the media provide us with the kinds of information that helps individual and collective decision-making? Do media provide us with enough of this information? Do we trust the information provided by the media?”¹² The answers to these questions given by ordinary citizens do not bode well for the legacy media. For example, roughly one-third of people surveyed have dropped a legacy news source because of declining quality.¹³ Public confidence in print and television news is hovering around 20 percent, with surprisingly little difference across age, education, or gender.¹⁴ Some of this discontent is surely due to an overriding discouragement with the mean tone of politics today—a tone that inevitably saturates conventional news reporting. Beyond the negativity of politics and the tendency of journalists to get caught up in it, there are many other factors affecting the quality of our political information system today. Let’s begin with why so many observers argue for finding ways to save or reinvent journalism.

Why Journalism Matters

The struggles of the legacy press system may not worry most people because there appear to be so many outlets for information that it is hard to keep up with them. One only need enter a topic in a search engine to find hundreds or thousands of sites with information about it. Yet many of the blogs, webzines, and online news organizations are merely recycling the shrinking journalism content produced by increasingly threatened news organizations. Consider a revealing study of one news microcosm: the “news ecosystem” of the city of Baltimore. The Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism conducted a study of where information about poli-

tics, government, and public life came from in that city.¹⁵ The study looked at various media, from newspaper, radio, and television to blogs and other online sites. Although this information system seemed rich and diverse, with some 53 different outlets for news, tracking the origins of actual news items showed that 95 percent of the stories containing original information “came from traditional media—most of them from the newspaper.” Even more distressing was a look back in time showing that the sole surviving paper, the *Baltimore Sun*, reported 32 percent fewer stories between 1999 and 2009, and 73 percent fewer than in 1991.

In his sweeping look at the creation (and demise) of the modern media, Paul Starr argued that if these trends continue, the growing ignorance of the citizenry and the diminished public accountability of officials will surely be accompanied by a great wave of public corruption.¹⁶ Indeed, many citizens already see corruption in government as a major problem. For example, a 2008 poll on the roots of the financial crisis showed that 62 percent strongly agreed with the statement that political corruption played a major role in the crisis, and another 19 percent agreed “somewhat” with that statement.¹⁷ By 2013, 76 percent of Americans felt that the political parties were the most corrupt institutions and that the problem was growing worse.¹⁸

Despite evidence that problems with accountability or watchdog journalism began long before news organizations encountered financial problems or lost audiences, many proposals focus on improving the financial health of existing journalism organizations. While remedies such as putting up paywalls for access to online information may work for specialized publications such as the *Wall Street Journal*, they do not seem destined to save journalism in general. The immediate problem is that as long as there are free news outlets, those charging for the same information will not likely attract many paying customers. Whether or not there is truth to the popular Internet mantra that “information wants to be free,”¹⁹ it is also equally true that those who produce quality, independent information want to be paid.

Despite these perceived limitations, a strong case can still be made that independent journalism is the only hope for regular and reliable information about what those in power are doing.²⁰ Without it, say proponents of this view, the lights go out on democracy, meaning that government is left to police itself while promoting its own activities through public relations, propaganda, or spin.²¹

Can the News Be Fixed?

In the view of scholars like Thomas Patterson, the answer is for journalism organizations to return to their core values of informing the

public with timely and accurate information about government and public life. He notes that studies of what kinds of news Americans follow most closely put topics like wars, economic problems, and policy issues at the top (along with bad weather and natural disasters), while scandals and the lives of celebrities are at the bottom.²² The problem, according to Patterson, is that even when journalists try to cover important issues, they often get caught in tedious battles between politicians that shift the focus from the underlying issues to power struggles and spin. Since controversy and fights are thought to be good for drawing audiences, news organizations often amp up the political drama at the expense of more useful information.

However, before we decide that fixing the news is a simple matter of returning to core values, we must address a serious problem that stands in the way: a commercial media system that has been in a downward spiral of declining audiences, revenues, and product quality for several decades. News organizations in modern America were unusual businesses in the sense that they produced a public good (the news) through commercial transactions involving selling audiences to advertisers.²³ Until fairly recently, the ethics of professional journalism maintained something of a “firewall” between the journalism and the advertising sides of the business, with the result that advertisers had minimal direct control over what the news side did. At the same time, advertisers generally cared little about whether their money helped support a news bureau in Berlin or paid for reporting a story about the effects of climate change in Bolivia. There were, of course, times when commercial sponsors clashed with reporting decisions, as we will see in chapter 7. However, the current system has become bent on finding content that delivers desired consumers to advertisers, often to little avail. Online information sites can deliver advertising images in far more personalized ways to each individual, so that different people see different ads in the same article, and even different articles on a site. When the Internet suddenly offered cheaper and more precise means of targeting both ads and content to audiences, advertisers and audiences began to drift away from conventional media formats, leaving the news itself as an odd piece out in the media picture. Who would pay to produce that story on climate change? Who would pay to watch it? Most other democracies (including America in earlier times) have better understood the benefit of protecting such a valuable public good by figuring out how to support it through public subsidies, much in the way defense, public safety, education, and health care have been variously supported or subsidized as public goods.

In response to these fundamental problems with the legacy press, scholars such as Robert McChesney and John Nichols offer a variety of pub-

lic subsidy models for the press that they argue have precedents in the American past.²⁴ However, in today's antigovernment political environment favoring privatization and market solutions, public subsidies for the press seem unlikely to be met with the reasoned debate necessary for such sweeping changes to occur. Even if new ways to support the press are developed (and there have been interesting experiments in recent years as discussed in chapter 7), citizens still must want the kind of information found in newspapers and broadcast programs.

Despite surveys showing that people say they would consume higher-quality news reporting, many people under 30 cannot imagine making appointments to watch the nightly news or sit in front of shouting pundits as their parents or grandparents do. News reports emphasizing the game of politics and fighting between the parties put many people off. And delivering those reports through clunky newspapers or scheduled broadcasts often clashes with how people seek information in mobile lifestyles. Younger citizens would rather search for topics of interest or follow links to YouTube videos sent by trusted friends on Facebook. Watching reports directly from other citizens who upload cell phone videos on YouTube may seem more authentic than having reporters interpret the same events. Indeed, in many cases, it is hard to distinguish reporters from ordinary people in technology-equipped crowds at the scene of events. One journalist observed such confusion during the public protests against the government in Turkey in 2013: "With everyone carrying cellphones and various digital gear, police had trouble distinguishing actual journalists from protesters."²⁵

In short, economic problems are not the only challenges to "saving" the legacy press system. The public, particularly younger citizens, increasingly prefer different forms of information than engaging with the lumpy collections of content delivered in newspapers or television newscasts. As digital media scholar Clay Shirky put it, consumers "are not interested in single omnibus publications." Even more challenging, according to Shirky, is the fact that content flows through social networks according to a very different audience logic than defines the mass media: "the audience for news is now being assembled not by the paper but by other members of the audience."²⁶

The Citizen Gap: Who Follows the News?

As more people get their information online from Facebook and Twitter or Google News, Yahoo News, and the *Huffington Post*, fewer are consuming conventional news formats. As noted earlier, this often means seeing fewer stories and spending less time per story than citizens who go directly to general news sites with the aim of following a broad scope of

daily events. Studies claiming that large and growing populations of young online news consumers exist have produced a debate about whether the glass is half-empty or half-full. The Pew report *State of the News Media 2013* claimed that 60 percent of those under the age of 30 “got some form of digital news yesterday.”²⁷ Critics such as Thomas Patterson contend that those reports may be counting people who report seeing a few headlines as they pass through their Internet portals en route to Facebook, fan sites, or games.²⁸ Other studies claim that younger citizens are meaningfully engaged with politics online but simply do not go in depth in following stories the way older citizens do.²⁹ Whether there is an encouraging upswing in online news consumption or a far more scattered exposure to isolated stories via Internet portals and social media platforms remains an important question. Part of the answer involves the changing definitions of what people think of as news when they report their information habits. Another piece of this puzzle is the selective exposure to news that is personally interesting. Younger people are more likely to absorb news about selected issues such as gay and lesbian rights and immigration than about other issues such as oil drilling or partisan debates about shrinking the government.

These trends suggest a sea change in information habits. The dispersal of attention is greatest for young citizens faced with rising education costs, unstable job situations, and a far richer media environment than past generations. Casual observers often assume that the news deficit just has to do with being young and that it will change as young people grow up and take on more adult responsibilities, such as starting careers and settling down. Here again, the evidence does not seem optimistic. Martin Wattenberg’s careful look at comparable generations of news consumers going back as far as data permit (nearly a century in the case of newspapers) shows that news consumption has dropped substantially in each generation of young people over the past 40 years. For example, 70 percent of Americans born in the 1930s read newspapers on a daily basis by the time they turned 20, compared with just 20 percent of those born in the early 1980s. Equally steep declines mark parallel age groups with respect to TV news consumption in later decades. These trends are not unique to America. Most of the advanced democracies report similar declines in news consumption across the age range of their citizens.³⁰

Why does following the news matter? Not surprisingly, there is a connection between scattered engagement with the news and not knowing what is going on in the world of politics. Wattenberg also analyzed correlations between age and political information among Americans at different points in time. In the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, for example, citizens under 30 were

about as well informed as older age groups. After the 1970s, each decade saw younger generations become increasingly less informed and less likely to follow political issues and events (with a few notable exceptions such as 9/11). These trends are also true for most other democracies. He concludes that “today’s young adults are the least politically knowledgeable generation ever in the history of survey research.”³¹ However, more recent studies suggest that political knowledge among citizens under 30 is less an across-the-board problem and based more on self-selective exposure to particular topics and interests. For example, a Pew survey showed that citizens under 30 lagged significantly behind older age groups in the ability to identify various contemporary politicians and historical figures. They were also lower in knowledge about issues such as which party favored shrinking the federal government, taxing different income groups, and oil drilling in wilderness areas. However, the under 30s were far and away the most knowledgeable demographic about party positions on immigration and gay and lesbian rights.³²

Recent trends suggesting that younger citizens are getting information about issues that matter to them seem to be good news. However, there is also an interesting shift away from the earlier mass media model in which most Americans were something of a captive audience watching more or less the same newscasts about the same issues. This common exposure to an agenda of the nation’s issues surely created a different sense of who we are and what we have in common in contrast to today’s scattered exposure to issues of selective interest to different fragments of the public.³³ It is hard to sort out which came first, the fragmentation of society into warring political interests or the fragmentation of the media that produces different information flows in so many different media outlets. It makes sense to think that both of these changes interact to produce publics that are harder to reach, find less in common, and view politics and participation in very different ways. All of which makes it harder for various media to find and keep their audiences. All of this raises a big question: As audiences become harder to reach, more polarized, and selectively informed, what is the role of news in creating the link between citizens and officials that is so important to governing in a democracy?

Governing with the News

Political communication scholar Timothy Cook described the processes through which politicians and journalists have become inseparable as “governing with the news.”³⁴ Politicians need to get their positions into the news to establish themselves as movers and shakers in the Washington

image game and to signal to their backers and voters that they are visible and active leaders. Observing the rise of news management in governance, former CNN pollster and pundit William Schneider described Washington as a town of individual political entrepreneurs whose success and power often depend on their media images. Those images can be boosted when they are associated with the popularity of other visible politicians, like a winning president, or with popular developments, such as economic booms or successful wars.³⁵ When presidents appear to be losers, other politicians are less eager to be associated with them or their programs. For example, in the 2014 elections which proved disastrous for the Democrats, President Obama's popularity was well below 50 percent among voters in many contested House and Senate races, so Democratic candidates did not invite him to campaign for them. In states such as Kentucky where Obama's approval was extremely low, the ever popular ex-president Bill Clinton stepped in to campaign against scare and hate messages that he said were "keeping the people so torn up and upset that they can't think anymore."³⁶

Journalists in this system receive a fresh and economical daily supply of news, along with insider status and professional respect when they land the big interviews and inside scoops. Journalist Marvin Kalb described these perverse developments in "press-politics": "There isn't a single major and sometimes minor decision reached at the White House, reached up on the Hill, reached at the State Department or the Pentagon, that does not have the press in mind. The way in which this is going to be sold to the American people is a function of the way in which the press first understands it, and then accepts it, and then is prepared to propagate a certain vision to the American people."³⁷

What is ironic in this process is that despite the often fierce competition for these inside tidbits, the overall results display relatively little variation in stories across the mainstream media. Even organizations with a political point of view, such as Fox News or MSNBC, start with much the same topics but favor the spin from one end of the political spectrum over the other. Cook concluded that the similarity of approaches to covering the news and the homogeneity of content across the thousands of mainstream news organizations support the idea that the news media (despite the plurality of the term "media") operate as a single political institution, covering much the same territory with much the same often sensationalistic results. He described this as "the abiding paradox of newsmaking: News professes to be fresh, novel, and unexpected, but is actually remarkably patterned across news outlets and over time. Rather than providing an unpredictable and startling array of happenings, the content of news is similar from day to day,

not only in featuring familiar personages and familiar locales, but also in the kinds of stories set forth and the morals these stories are supposed to tell."³⁸ The mutual dependency of journalists and officials in the production of news means that this institution of the press—even though protected in its freedom and independence by the Constitution—in fact amounts to a fourth, and not so independent, branch of government.

The ability or inability of officials to make and control the news is an important part of the power to govern, as reflected in the capacity of news to (a) shape public opinion among those citizens still paying attention, (b) sway different political factions to join or oppose political initiatives, such as going to war or addressing climate change, (c) hold officials more or less accountable for those initiatives, and (d) simply inform citizens about what the government is doing. At the forefront of information politics is the struggle over influencing or *spinning* journalists and news organizations to report versions of events that favor particular political sides.

As more and more citizens defect from this system, politicians increasingly find direct ways to reach them such as through Facebook and Twitter or by placing campaign ads inside video games. However, an important part of the governing process is creating images that other politicians react to, making much of what goes on in the press rather insulated and inside the Beltway of Washington, DC. Yet, even as citizens defect from this system, and even as the press suffers as a result, the dance of politics between politicians and the press goes on.

Politicians and the Media: A Symbiotic Relationship

From the standpoint of the politicians, businesses, and interest organizations that largely define politics in America, it has long been clear that power and influence depend on the control and strategic use of information. Despite growing public skepticism, newsmaking continues to be the most important way to get issues on the public agenda. The idea of *agenda setting* involves using the news to influence what the public regards as important for them to think about in society and politics.³⁹ Because of the importance of newsmaking for public relations, politicians from presidents and members of Congress to abortion activists, environmentalists, and antitax groups all have learned to *go public* by finding ways to take their political messages into the news.⁴⁰ An irony of mediated politics is that being well informed about the issues on the public agenda often means taking cues from familiar sources using the news to *frame* stories around their partisan viewpoints.⁴¹ When this influence process works, the news not only tells people what to think about; it can also tell them what to think.⁴²

Desperation to reach audiences (who are often running away from this kind of communication) has led many politicians to poison the well of politics through negative campaigning and railing against government as the root of most evils. Having warned citizens about people like themselves, politicians who then get into office are forced to hire communication consultants to sell themselves and their ideas back to increasingly wary and weary publics. These staged political performances often appear forced and artificial to media-savvy audiences—and young citizens are among the most savvy media consumers. Indeed, reality TV and political comedy often seem more authentic than the political performances made for news.⁴³ News that resembles entertainment has earned the name “infotainment” from communication scholars. The difference is that the characters in political programming often seem less sympathetic and emotionally accessible than the young and vulnerable characters starring in reality programs.

A case in point is the long-running national health care debate that has continued for years after passage of the Affordable Care Act in 2010, running through the elections of 2010, 2012, and 2014, fueling the government shutdown of 2013, and filling thousands of hours of talk shows and news in between. Republican opponents quickly dubbed the legislation “Obamacare.” The Obama administration neglected to brand or market the new program and eventually embraced the Obamacare brand to defuse its negativity. The lengthy news battle was amped up by PR and hype to reach elusive audiences. One memorable episode began with a press release by then House minority leader (later House Speaker) John Boehner claiming that a provision in the proposed legislation would lead the country down the road to government-encouraged euthanasia.⁴⁴ The talk radio echo chamber, blogosphere, email lists, and YouTube videos⁴⁵ soon turned this into chants that Obamacare would “kill your grandma.” Talk radio personality Rush Limbaugh likened Obama’s plan to Hitler and the Nazis,⁴⁶ which provoked Republican columnist David Brooks on NBC’s *Meet the Press* to call the attacks “insane.”⁴⁷ Yet the shock rhetoric continued to be delivered by prominent Republicans from members of Congress to Sarah Palin, who talked about “death panels” on her Facebook page and tweeted: “R death panels back in?”⁴⁸ And so the “kill yer granny” messages cycled through the mainstream news media, as they were too tempting to resist for news organizations seeking cheap sensationalism. The death panel rhetoric earned the 2009 Lie of the Year award from the fact-checking organization PolitiFact. The hysteria continued for years, as the Republicans deemed it their best political issue. Problems with the government launch of public sign-up websites in 2013 added to the frenzy, and Obamacare was chosen as the central cam-

paign issue in the 2014 elections. A national ad produced by the Republican National Committee warned that Obamacare would “cost our economy 2.5 million jobs.” Other ads warned of soaring costs of prescription drugs and loss of current health coverage.⁴⁹ Such campaign ad themes were recycled in the news, magnifying their effects for better or worse. The attacks continued into the 2016 Republican primaries, with Florida senator Marco Rubio claiming he had done the most to undermine the national health care program, although not mentioning that he had signed his own family up through one of the programs created by the Affordable Care Act.

This mutually dependent relationship enabling politicians to spin the press explains how the news helped the Bush administration sell the war in Iraq. Do you remember the Iraq War, which officially ended in an American troop withdrawal in 2011? According to many observers, most Americans have tried to forget it, in the words of one scholar, as “a very bad memory.”⁵⁰ A report authored by some 30 scholars and policy experts issued in 2013 on the 10th anniversary of the US invasion noted, among other things, a cost of nearly 500,000 mostly Iraqi civilian lives; around 2 million Iraqi refugees, and some 2 million more displaced inside the country; a financial cost to US taxpayers possibly as high as between \$4 and \$6 trillion, depending on the interest rates on the war debt; and a legacy of social destruction, political corruption, and instability in Iraq afterward.⁵¹ In 2015 the United States sent a small number of troops back into Iraq to help train an inept Iraqi army in its efforts to regain territory lost to ISIS. How did this unfortunate situation get started?

Within a year of the attacks of September 11, 2001, the Bush administration rolled out a well-designed marketing campaign to link the attacks of 9/11 to Iraq.⁵² The United States was already waging a far more credible war with broad international support in Afghanistan. The fight there was against a government that supported al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden, who were clearly linked to the attacks on America. There was little evidence that Iraq was similarly involved. Nonetheless, the president and other high administration officials began a public relations offensive to create the impression that there was a link between Iraq and that terrible day when airliners full of passengers were hijacked and flown into the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon, and a plane intended for another target in Washington crashed in a Pennsylvania field after passengers struggled to overpower the hijackers. The news following these events was enriched with allegations that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction. Officials appeared on Sunday news interview programs and punctuated their arguments with images of mushroom clouds. Those erroneous claims would later become

material for late-night comedians, who joked about “weapons of mass deception.”

The Iraq War stands as an iconic episode in the modern history of spin. Selling the war to the media and, in turn, to other politicians and to the American people stands as an example of how governing with the news when PR is deceptive can lead to bad outcomes for public faith in both government and the news. Beyond the loose facts and the foggy justification for the war, one thing became clear afterward: the battle for control of news images was the most important factor in shaping support both for the war and for the Bush administration’s capacity to govern effectively for several more years after the invasion. The first media victory was predictably inside the Beltway, among elected officials, where opinion matters most. As the government dominated the media imagery, opponents shrank from challenging the war. The few who spoke out were relegated to the back news pages, if reported at all. From the viewpoint of the mainstream press, they were minority voices on the losing side of a policy decision. The second line of symbolic victory was over the American public, who grew increasingly attentive to an issue as big as waging war against an alleged terrorist nation.

With so few opposition voices in the news, who and what were the American people to believe? When administration dominance of news was at its peak around the time of the invasion in early 2003, fully 69 percent of the public felt that an Iraq connection to 9/11 was at least somewhat likely. Thanks to continuing administration domination of the news, solid majorities of Americans continued to believe that Iraq had something to do with the events of 9/11 long after facts to the contrary had come to light.⁵³

When Barack Obama took charge of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, both governments were so corrupt that their main activities appeared to involve siphoning off US aid money and providing so little security and service to their own people that they may have turned many ordinary citizens into radicalized enemy combatants. Indeed, one observer has credited the United States with inadvertently creating the world’s largest organized crime networks in Afghanistan.⁵⁴ More recently, a new threat appeared in Iraq and Syria in the form of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which suddenly replaced lesser terrorist organizations in the news after it captured large swaths of Iraq on account of the corruption and ineffectiveness of the Iraqi army and government. ISIS captured world attention by beheading captives and burning them alive and posting the grisly videos on YouTube.

When critics look back on such policy failures, they often find that they were poorly deliberated in public and based on incomplete or inaccurate

evidence that was papered over by spin. But even when covering such a big event like a war, how is it that journalists get spun? The curious answer is that the press has evolved a set of informal reporting routines that make getting spun the norm rather than the exception.

Getting Spun: Indexing the News to Political Power

Like the reporting on the run-up to the Iraq War, many politically heated stories raise troubling questions about what journalists should do when officials say things that are inconsistent with available evidence. In the case of selling a war, the question is whether one side of a story should be so dominant just because other officials in government are afraid or unwilling to challenge it. There are many variations on this dilemma. What if there are two sides to a story being debated within official circles of power, but one is likely not true? For example, many years after the scientific community had reached consensus that global warming was accelerating because of human causes, many conservative politicians rejected that consensus and got their doubting views into the headlines. During the Bush administration, civil servants in environment-related departments claimed they had been ordered to change scientific reports to bring them in line with the administration position.⁵⁵ Even though investigations showed that many of the politicians denying climate change had close political and financial relationships with industries such as oil that contribute to carbon pollution, that was a minor story compared to the long-running political climate debate in which one side simply dismissed the evidence against its position. (This episode is discussed in more detail in the case study in chapter 4.)

Should both sides of a story be covered when one is likely not true? Should a story be allowed to become one-sided when there is evidence to challenge it but powerful officials are simply unwilling to voice that evidence? Either way, American journalism does not have easy answers to these important questions. Finding an answer would require freeing the press from its dependence on government and powerful officials as its reference on reality. According to Thomas Patterson, this sort of “he said, she said” journalism is part of the reason why the news does a poor job of informing the public and clarifying rather than confusing important issues.⁵⁶ Despite the seemingly obvious role of the press to sort out facts and evidence, journalists have a surprisingly difficult time when politicians serve up distortions and outright lies, as shown in the case study below.

Why has the American press become caught in this curious dependence on how those in power define reality? I have termed this reporting pattern

indexing, which refers to the tendency of mainstream news organizations to index or adjust the range of viewpoints in a story to the dominant positions of those whom journalists perceive to have enough power to affect the outcome of a situation.⁵⁷ This curious reporting system, as explained further in chapter 5, is a result of the long-standing commitment of the mainstream press to cling to a norm of balance, fairness, or objectivity. If journalists want to appear objective or balanced, they cannot become involved in telling the audience what is really going on. Rather, journalists must channel images of reality through external sources, and the safest sources are those who are elected by the public and who have the power to shape political outcomes. Sometimes those in power also have reasons to confuse or distort the issues—reasons ranging from their own value biases to saying what they must in order to attract the financial support they need to stay in power. Hence the subtitle of this book: *The Politics of Illusion*.

What this reporting system means is that when government is working well, and elected representatives are offering competing alternatives for solving policy problems, the news is filled with competing views that may help engaged citizens think critically about decisions facing the nation. On the other hand, if certain factions in power promote deceptive or untruthful spin in the service of powerful interests, then those ideas also become presented as equally valid alongside more plausible versions of events. Similarly, political parties may decide not to raise doubts about bad ideas because they are hard to explain to inattentive publics, or the parties fear being punished in elections by emotionally aroused publics who buy the spin from the other side. When these things happen, bad ideas become the dominant news frames. If journalists introduced independent evidence to balance such stories, they would be accused of bias or of campaigning for their own agendas. And so spin rules. To return to the example of the Iraq War, the Democratic Party decided not to challenge a then popular President Bush following 9/11 on his claim that Iraq was implicated in the terrorism attacks. The resulting news was dominated by the administration PR campaign to sell the war.

The legacy of the Iraq War raises an uncomfortable truth about the US news system. While many Americans are uninformed because they are inattentive to the news, it may also be the case that paying attention to deceptive news can result in becoming misinformed. In the case of Iraq, some news organizations did a better job than others in helping their audiences critically assess government claims about the war, but many who followed the news from most outlets came away misinformed by the dominant spin. For example, even after claims about weapons of mass destruction

and Iraqi links to al-Qaeda had been seriously challenged by sources outside the administration, 80 percent of the viewers of Fox News still shared one or more of these factual inaccuracies about the war, while only 23 percent of Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and National Public Radio (NPR) audiences were similarly mistaken. Other mainstream news sources misinformed people at rates closer to Fox than NPR, with CBS at 71 percent, ABC at 61 percent, NBC at 55 percent, and CNN at 55 percent—print news sources had an average reader misperception rate of 47 percent.⁵⁸

Even the best news organizations left large numbers of people misinformed simply because they did not check or challenge what those politicians who spoke out were saying. It also appears that the more mainstream or popular news organizations were least likely to challenge government propaganda. The point here is not that journalists were making up facts but that most news organizations simply emphasized what powerful official sources told them, even though other credible sources such as United Nations weapons inspectors were available to challenge those accounts of reality. Such confusions of reality and power may undermine the credibility of news for many citizens. As journalists become spun by officials and join the establishment by sharing often short-lived conventional wisdoms, power becomes the definer of truth. Instead of having a news system that speaks truth to power, the dictates of power produce a news product that comedian Stephen Colbert called “truthiness.” Indeed, many citizens seek perspective in political comedy or “fake news” because they cannot find it in the real news, as the case study in this chapter explains.

CASE STUDY

POLITICAL COMEDY REVEALS THE “TRUTHINESS” ABOUT NEWS

NBC News anchor Brian Williams was suspended from his lofty journalism post after telling false stories about his helicopter being hit by enemy fire when he was reporting the invasion of Iraq. Williams’s fake war story was challenged by a crewmember of the helicopter that actually got hit on an earlier mission that day. The war veteran’s post on the NBC Facebook page about the story said: “Sorry dude, I don’t remember you being on my aircraft.” The story traveled quickly through social media, the legacy press, and comedy news, raising questions about Williams’s trust level, as the journalist’s celebrity index score (a marketing measure of brand reputation) tumbled 800 points in a few days.⁵⁹

New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd noted that social media had made the story impossible to ignore and had dealt another blow to an already struggling

institution of TV news. Dowd called social media “the genre that helped make the TV evening news irrelevant by showing us that we don’t need someone to tell us every night what happened that day.” For this and other reasons, Dowd contended that TV news was no longer the authoritative source for information it once was. Pressed by falling ratings and desperate to stay afloat, TV news long ago began chasing audiences with dubious stories, hyperbole, animal videos, and entertainment fare that pushed it into the “infotainment” business. Dowd suggested that the blurred boundaries between entertainment and news might have contributed to Williams’s manufactured drama. Williams had long before crossed the line to join the entertainment media with frequent appearances on *Saturday Night Live*, *The Daily Show*, *The Tonight Show* (slow-jamming the news with Jimmy Fallon), and the sitcom *30 Rock*. Dowd noted that as the news becomes more disconnected from reality, “the nightly news anchors are not figures of authority. They’re part of the entertainment, branding, and cross-promotion business.”⁶⁰ Iconic comedy news anchor Jon Stewart (who announced his retirement from *The Daily Show* amid the Williams scandal) commented: “We got us a case here of infotainment confusion syndrome.”⁶¹

Meanwhile, the fake news on Comedy Central and *Saturday Night Live*, among other places, was becoming more credible. Comedy news anchor John Oliver had recently broken a couple of real news stories and was hiring investigative reporters to develop material for his show. Long before Brian Williams’s credibility scandal, an online poll conducted by *Time* magazine showed that Jon Stewart was America’s most trusted newscaster, beating such journalists as Brian Williams and Katie Couric by a wide margin.⁶²

Top comedy news programs often beat serious cable news shows in the ratings. During his run as the king of fake news, Jon Stewart often rivaled Bill O’Reilly on Fox as the top draw on cable news—except Stewart was not delivering real news. The rivalry prompted O’Reilly to dismiss Stewart’s audience as “stoned slackers.” In fact, comedy news audiences easily beat most TV news audiences in the prime age, education, and consumer demographics sought after by advertisers. What makes fake news so popular at a time when the real news is having such credibility problems?

Many in the fake news audience find that they get perspective on the spin and the staged aspects of TV news. Before moving on to become host of *The Late Show* on CBS, comedian Stephen Colbert hosted *The Colbert Report* on Comedy Central—something of a spoof of *The O’Reilly Factor* on Fox. Among his many contributions to fake news lore, Colbert coined the term “truthiness” to refer to the many political statements that officials introduce into the news that are not entirely consistent with available evidence. As explained by the indexing model of the news, journalists often have trouble introducing evidence independently unless other

officials contest the spurious claims. Thus, the news often conveys mainly the trappings of truth: a sincere sense of conviction and all the authoritativeness that earnest officials and journalists can provide. Yet important elements of reality are often missing. This appearance of truth while important evidence is left out is the essence of “truthiness.” The missing reality bits make it possible for political comics to point out the political follies that officials offer as serious news. Larry Wilmore, host of *The Nightly Show* on Comedy Central, welcomed Williams to the club “as a fellow purveyor of fake news.”⁶³

Behind the production of journalistic truthiness is the implicit recognition by powerful figures and their media advisors that what they say in the news generally cannot be challenged effectively by journalists unless they find another Washington source of comparable power or status to do the job. This confusion of power and credibility can lead some politicians to take considerable liberties with the truth in pursuit of strong convictions. Most journalists are not happy about this spin game, and many become cynical about the political situations they cover through the statements of officials, which explains the rise of stories that frame politics as a kind of game. The interplay of press and politicians is often testy and adversarial, with reporters trying to get officials to reconcile their spin with observable realities. Consider a revealing moment during an interview between Ron Suskind, a prominent journalist, and a senior presidential advisor who grew tired of the cat-and-mouse game of journalists trying to get him to admit to inconsistencies in the official script. The official suddenly dismissed the journalist as belonging to the “reality-based community.” Suskind recalls the revealing moment in these terms:

The aide said that guys like me were “in what we call the reality-based community,” which he defined as people who “believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.” I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. “That’s not the way the world really works anymore,” he continued. “We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.”⁶⁴

While politics still attracts many people of goodwill, even goodwill may become blinded by strong convictions that block out the reality of other views. In these moments, the press often has trouble making independent corrections. Consider an exchange between veteran journalist Ted Koppel and Jon Stewart who described a typical “two-sided” news interview format: “She throws out her figures from the Heritage Foundation and she throws her figures from the Brookings

Institute, and the anchor, who should be the arbiter of the truth says, 'Thank you both very much. That was really interesting.' No, it wasn't! That was Coke and Pepsi talking about beverage truth. And that game is what has, I think, caused people to go, 'I'm not watching this.'"⁶⁵

As communication scholar Dannagal Young points out in her analysis of this interview: "Stewart explicitly rejects the premise that the journalist's role is to present opposing sets of facts from official sources. Instead, he argues that ignoring the underlying truth-value of those 'facts' denies viewers an important critical analysis of political life, and instead the journalist should act as an 'arbiter of the truth.'"⁶⁶ As the interview continued, Koppel seemed a bit wistful about the freedom that comedy gives Stewart to point out deception, or BS as Koppel put it, yet he firmly denied that it was the role of journalists to make such corrections:

Koppel: [You] can use humor to say, "BS." You know, "That's a crock."

Stewart: But that's always been the case . . . Satire has always. . . .

Koppel: Okay, but I can't do that.

Stewart: But you can say that's BS. You don't need humor to do it, because you have what I wish I had—which is credibility, and gravitas . . . I also think that it's important to take a more critical look. Don't you think?

Koppel: No.⁶⁷

Dannagal Young argues that this greater capacity to get at the truth—or at least point out deception and spin—makes comedy "the new journalism." Indeed, Professor Young has been influential in my thinking about comedy as an important medium for sorting out the truth, as she recounts in an article that mentions how different editions of this book have changed.⁶⁸ Her perception is widely shared even by other journalists. When Stewart appeared on the cover of *Newsweek*, the story described him as changing the presentation of news to appeal to a younger audience that has largely tuned out conventional news.⁶⁹ It turns out that audiences for programs, such as *The Daily Show* are among the most informed and active members of the public. Despite the worries of many parents and teachers, late-night comedy audiences do not get all their news from the comedians; they bring high levels of news knowledge with them. Otherwise, as Jon Stewart once put it, they wouldn't get the jokes.⁷⁰

Meanwhile, journalists often remain trapped in a symbiotic system dependent on official spin that is largely of their own making. This odd evolution of a mainstream news system that reports mainly what officials say was the subject of one of Stephen Colbert's most controversial comedy routines when he addressed the annual White House Correspondents' Association dinner. This insider affair generally involves a gentle roast of the president and is one of the "A ticket" events in Washington, attended by the elite press corps, powerful politicians, and celebri-

ties. In his appearance, Colbert stepped into his faux Bill O'Reilly character and first took on President Bush and then the press.

Ladies and gentlemen of the press corps, Madame First Lady, Mr. President, my name is Stephen Colbert, and tonight it is my privilege to celebrate this president, 'cause we're not so different, he and I. We both get it. Guys like us, we're not some brainiacs on the nerd patrol. We're not members of the factinista. We go straight from the gut. Right, sir? . . .

And as excited as I am to be here with the President, I am appalled to be surrounded by the liberal media that is destroying America, with the exception of FOX News. FOX News gives you both sides of every story: the President's side, and the Vice President's side.

But the rest of you, what are you thinking? Reporting on NSA wiretapping or secret prisons in Eastern Europe? Those things are secret for a very important reason: they're super-depressing. . . .

Over the last five years you people were so good, over tax cuts, WMD intelligence, the effect of global warming. We Americans didn't want to know, and you had the courtesy not to try to find out. Those were good times, as far as we knew.

But, listen, let's review the rules. Here's how it works. The President makes decisions. He's the decider. The press secretary announces those decisions, and you people of the press type those decisions down. Make, announce, type. Just put 'em through a spell check and go home. Get to know your family again. Make love to your wife.

Write that novel you got kicking around in your head. You know, the one about the intrepid Washington reporter with the courage to stand up to the administration? You know, fiction!⁷¹

Colbert may have hit the mark too closely, as neither the president nor many reporters in the audience seemed to be laughing as the event was aired on C-SPAN. The *Washington Post* later panned the performance, saying that Colbert "fell flat." *New York Times* coverage did not mention Colbert. On *The Daily Show*, Jon Stewart quipped that Colbert must have been under the false impression "that they'd hired him to do what he does every night on television."⁷² Frank Rich, a former media critic and political columnist for the *New York Times*, guessed that Colbert fell flat not because he was rude to the president but because "his real sin was to be rude to the capital press corps, whom he caricatured as stenographers. Though most of the Washington audience failed to find the joke funny, Americans elsewhere, having paid a heavy price for the press's failure to challenge the White House propaganda about Iraq, laughed until it hurt."⁷³ As Rich noted, even though the national press failed to see its humor, the performance spread virally on the Internet,

becoming an overnight sensation on YouTube, blogs, and podcasts. Various clips of the performance posted on YouTube were viewed nearly three million times within a few days and continued to gain viewers for many years thereafter.

Despite Colbert and many other comedians raising such uncomfortable truths about truthiness, the hallowed rules of the reporting game continue to make it difficult for most journalists to act differently. Consider how this journalistic dilemma was handled by the public editor of the *New York Times*, an ombudsman for readers who raise questions about *Times* coverage. Readers challenged a number of cases where *Times* reporters simply passed on claims by politicians that seemed either doubtful or outright wrong. The public editor noted that if reporters corrected lies from politicians, they would be imposing their own judgments in news stories, which, in his view, goes beyond their journalistic mandate to be “objective and fair.” He wondered how reporters could be fair in deciding which facts to correct. He also noted that *Times* op-ed columnist Paul Krugman proclaimed that politics had entered a “post-truth” age, adding that columnists like Krugman had the freedom to tell readers when they think politicians are lying. In the end, the ombudsman turned the question back to his concerned readers: “Should news reporters do the same?”⁷⁴

This awkward moment of truth from one of the nation’s leading news organizations sparked an outcry from various advocates who propose redefining journalism in order to save it. Critics included Jay Rosen, Clay Shirky, and Glenn Greenwald. Greenwald (who helped report the story of the National Security Agency spying on American citizens) noted that most journalists were offended by Stephen Colbert’s charge that they were stenographers taking dictation from politicians, but the *Times* discussion made holding politicians accountable sound like an “exotic or edgy” idea.⁷⁵ And so political comedy has become a trusted news source. When Trevor Noah succeeded Jon Stewart as *Daily Show* host, he vowed to maintain the standard Stewart established and continue “the war on bullshit.” Meanwhile, many legacy journalists are still convinced they are holding up higher standards and remain puzzled about why they have lost public confidence and why their audiences are shrinking.

What about the People?

The irony of the way the news has evolved is that the often shrill and dramatic efforts to attract audiences drive many citizens away. Many others are only intermittently attentive. Meanwhile, political insiders watch the same news with great interest. Politicians, lobbyists, public relations professionals, and journalists follow the daily spin with the attention of sports fans to see who is winning and who is losing the daily struggle for image control. The symbiosis between journalists and the communication

professionals who spin the messages of their political clients keeps the process going, creating what media scholars David Altheide and Robert Snow called a “media logic” that is hard to break out of.⁷⁶

From the standpoint of those on the inside who continue to produce this strange media logic, the shrill voices filling the talk shows and the carefully crafted sound bites in news reports become a substitute for public opinion itself.⁷⁷ Not surprisingly, many members of the public express the concern that the news is more for insiders than for them. According to media scholar Robert Entman, this media logic produces a democracy without citizens.⁷⁸ Opinion polls and occasional public protests bring citizens into the news frame, but generally in cameo roles rather than starring performances. This noisy media echo chamber of clashing images and slogans ends up driving out more-thoughtful viewpoints, along with space for deliberation and reflection. Woe to the politician who cannot explain health care reform in less than 30 seconds (and woe to the citizen who tries to grasp it in 30 seconds). Foreign policies that address the complexities of international relations become vulnerable to charges of weakness and indecision.

As people become bombarded with spin, and are encouraged to choose sides in a confusing information system in which the press offers little perspective, it is not surprising that there are many different information strategies that people pursue. Many have simply tuned out. Some turn to political comedy. Others choose news with points of view that agree with their own political beliefs and values. And social media recommendations become a convenient filter for many. No matter the personal strategy, the incessant political spin machines are trying to find ways to get through to people.

As social media now reach large numbers of people directly, political information increasingly comes from Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and dozens of other digital media platforms. As long as it remains relatively open, the Internet lowers the costs of political communication for many citizens who are learning how to communicate with each other in cheap, fast, and effective ways. Communities of environmentalists, pro-choice and pro-life abortion groups, fair labor and fair trade campaigners, human rights workers, and computer privacy groups have mastered communicating with large networked audiences using cheap and available technologies. In the process, many interesting experiments are in progress that may reinvent the news and more generally improve how citizens communicate with each other and with leaders.

While some may object to the quality of citizen-produced information, the degradation of the press system may not seem to offer better options.

Moreover, as the mass media fragment into smaller niche channels, the news is frequently marketed to the lifestyles and political values of different audience segments. When people seek self-confirming information, the news does not so much inform or challenge them as it affirms and reinforces what they already want to believe.⁷⁹ All of this complicates answering the simple question: What is news?

A Definition of News

The impact of news on the quality of democracy is always changing. Political communication scholar Bruce Bimber makes a bold assertion about power in American politics: that it is biased toward those with the best command of political information.⁸⁰ Bimber follows this claim by tracing the development of American democracy from *The Federalist* to the present day in terms of information regimes. The first great expansion of democratic participation came with the rise of a national mail system that carried many newspapers and publications, perhaps making the US Post Office the most important institution for expanding democracy in the early American republic.⁸¹ A flash-forward to the late twentieth century shows American democracy evolving through the information regime of the mass media, which is now in its late stages. Technologies, such as broadcast television and satellite communication enabled Americans to share common experiences that affected the entire nation. Politicians in the mass media age became experts at “going public” by using the media to deliver messages directly to large audiences.⁸² The twenty-first-century information regime is multimedia, with fragmented audiences and channels, often driven by social networks. There are many sources of content: social media, crowdsourced information platforms, and comedy, as well as journalism still doing what defined the news for much of the last century.

As the mass media information regime erodes, many observers worry that multiplying media niches may produce individuals who become informed just about issues and perspectives that suit their personal lifestyles and beliefs. Can a democracy with so many exclusive, personalized media realities have coherent policy discussions, much less share a common purpose?⁸³ At the very least, we should bring the news down to earth and recognize that it is continually changing, and that these changes are shaped by a chaotic set of factors that may not engineer an information product with the best interests of democracy in mind.

How do the changing interactions among political actors, publics, and the press affect the way we define the news? As a starting point, it makes sense to adopt a simple definition that expands political news beyond just

what news organizations produce: *news consists of (a) the reporting of actions and events (b) over a growing variety of publicly accessible media (c) by journalism organizations and an expanding spectrum of other content producers, including ordinary citizens.* As the news process expands beyond the legacy media, standards for selecting, formatting, sourcing, and documenting reports become less shared and more open to challenges about accuracy and relevance. Yet as some properties of news change, others remain the same. Doris Graber suggested that news is not just any information, or even the most important information, about the world; rather, the news tends to contain information that is *timely*, often *sensational* (scandals, violence, and human drama frequently dominate the news), and *familiar* (stories often draw on familiar people or life experiences that give even distant events a close-to-home feeling).⁸⁴ In this view, the news is constructed through the constantly changing interactions of journalists, politicians, and citizens often seeking different ends. At the height of the mass media era, journalists were often regarded as “gatekeepers” who screened information (ideally) according to its truth and importance. More recently, as the news habits change and the capacity for direct news production and distribution by citizens grows, gatekeeping by the legacy press is less effective and, in the view of some observers, less important.⁸⁵

Despite all the changes outlined above, the legacy news reported by journalists remains important in the governing process, even as it may undermine the legitimacy of that same process for many citizens who consume it. The core question explored in this book is, *How well does the news, as the core of the national political information system, serve the needs of democracy?* In exploring this question, we examine how various political actors—from presidents and members of Congress to interest organizations and citizen-activists—try to get their messages into the news. Understanding how politics and government work requires understanding who makes the news and who does not. We also want to understand how that news affects elites, public opinion, and the resolution of issues and events.

The Fragile Link between News and Democracy

The diverse forces shaping news and public information raise interesting questions about how to promote the best outcomes for democracy. Many Americans seem to live with the false sense of security that the First Amendment and the Constitution will somehow guarantee a quality press. The chaotic forces outlined in this chapter suggest that there is no overarching plan to keep an ideal democratic information system in order. Even as profit-driven media owners dismantle news organizations and di-

minish the quality of journalism, they hide behind the First Amendment to defend against attempts by concerned citizen groups to make them behave more responsibly. The irony of this is that the First Amendment with its protections for press freedom was intended to enable an independent press to stand up to government power. While press freedom remains a crucial protection in democracy, it has also become a shield for corporate media to avoid social responsibility. For example, when a citizens' watchdog group challenged the renewal of four Denver television stations' broadcast licenses, it argued that the local stations displayed trends common to local news across the nation, which had become "severely unbalanced, with excessive coverage of violent topics and trivial events," creating "a public health issue" that "goes beyond bad journalism."⁸⁶ The Federal Communications Commission that handles broadcast licenses rejected the citizen petition, wrapping its ruling in the hallowed language of free speech: "Journalistic or editorial discretion in the presentation of news and public information is the core concept of the First Amendment's free press guarantee."⁸⁷ National broadcaster groups and the Denver stations heralded this formulaic pronouncement as an important victory for free speech—a triumph over censorship and the intrusion of government in the newsroom. Many media and law scholars worry about using the Constitution to defend publicly licensed communication content that is produced with little political or social purpose beyond making money.⁸⁸ The citizen group, Media Watch, argued that such high-minded defenses of bad news are part of the reason that we end up with news that "covers schoolyard shootings but not schools, train wrecks but not transportation, bloopers by local politicians but not local elections, and the latest murder but not dropping crime rates."⁸⁹

We may have built a national information fortress with just one wall, protecting the press from formal censorship yet leaving the information system vulnerable to degradation at the hands of poorly controlled business interests. Such interests, as any beginning economics student learns, have no intrinsic reason to embrace social responsibility beyond returning profits to their private investors. Why is something as important as public information left to the current turbulent mix of business profit imperatives, political spin techniques, and consumer tastes? This question would be less compelling if the news was not so important for the quality of democracy. Although it is tempting to assume that the news is somehow geared to the information needs of citizens, this chapter suggests a more disturbing possibility. There is currently little monitoring and few institutional checks to guarantee that the legacy press, as it has evolved, will serve the needs of American

democracy. To the contrary, substantial evidence indicates that the news is largely a freewheeling entity shaped by a combination of commercial forces in the news business, technologies of communication perfected by politicians and their media consultants, and the tastes and personal entertainment habits of citizens. More than in any other advanced democracy, political information in the United States is manufactured and sold with few of the quality controls that even far less important household products have.

Yet there is a good deal of complacency about this information system. Perhaps the faith in the free press system in the United States has led Americans to pay far less attention than citizens in other societies to improving the quality of democracy's most important product: political information. How does one of the freest press systems in the world produce news that so often misses the marks of accuracy and relevance? It is hard for most Americans to imagine that freedom and competition do not automatically guarantee the best results. As a consequence of this deep cultural faith in unrestricted political communication, there is stunningly little public discussion about how to design a news and information system that might better suit the needs of democratic politics and citizen involvement.

A goal of this book is to contribute to such a discussion about improving information forms that may emerge from this era of change. A good place to start is by explaining how the current news system has evolved: how legacy news is produced and sold, how it is shaped by political actors, how it is reported by journalists and news organizations, and how it is used by citizens. When this larger news picture is considered, commonly discussed problems, such as the fabled ideological bias of reporters, appear to be the least of the information problems faced by citizens. Moreover, we may begin to see ways in which citizens with direct access to media production via phones and computers can directly shape higher-quality public debate.