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THE MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY: Beyond Myths and Stereotypes

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Key Words First Amendment assumptions, marketplace of ideas, participatory citizenship, content analysis data, ownership patterns

■ **Abstract** This essay's point of departure is the hallowed belief that democracy requires active citizens and news media that supply them with information they need to participate effectively in politics. The main features of this model of a functioning democracy, including the underlying assumptions, are tested and found wanting. Neither citizens nor media are capable of performing the roles expected of them. The appropriateness of these roles for life in modern societies is also open to question, as are the many myths and stereotypes that obscure the interface between media and democracy. The fact that democracy can persist despite citizens and media that fall short of the expected performance suggests that political culture may be more important than citizen wisdom and media excellence. Rallies in civic activism during crises may also be a major factor in the durability of democratic governance in the United States.

Alexis de Tocqueville was among the first thinkers to recognize the importance of the press as a powerful force for the promotion of democracy. In the 1830s, in a chapter on the "Liberty of the Press in the United States" (Tocqueville 1984 [1835], pp. 94–95), he wrote that the press

> causes political life to circulate through all the parts of that vast territory. Its eye is constantly open to detect the secret springs of political designs and to summon the leaders of all parties in turn to the bar of public opinion. It rallies the interests of the community round certain principles and draws up the creed of every party; for it affords a means of intercourse between those who hear and address each other without ever coming into immediate contact.

DEFINING THE TARGET

Tocqueville's bold description hides the great difficulty of analyzing the interplay between mass media and democratic governance. The subject is pervaded by many long-standing myths, stereotypes, and controversies that obscure the relationship. Like Tocqueville, politicians almost universally believe that the media substantially

influence politics. Therefore, they feel the need to control the media to ensure that the information that is supplied benefits their political fortunes. The media's great political significance is also acknowledged by those scholars (e.g., Cook 1998, Mazzoleni & Schulz 1999) who call the media a political institution that plays an important role in politics along with many other institutions.

Politicians' and pundits' belief that governments can control their citizens by manipulating the media is one of the myths surrounding the media. The totalitarian regimes that arose in the period prior to World War II were unable to translate their control and expert manipulation of the media into lasting support by their citizens. When readily observable events contradicted government-inspired media stories, these real-life experiences trumped the stories. Media power to create the political reality that surrounds the public is emasculated when media credibility plunges owing to stories that run counter to direct observations.

Why do myths and stereotypes about the media and their role in sustaining democracy persist? One reason is that they are essential parts of citizens' larger belief systems about how our social systems work. Changing essential parts would call the entire system into question, which is a frightening prospect. It is also difficult to dispel the myths because they are so entrenched and so often repeated. Findings that contradict established orthodoxies are rarely welcome.

The myths and stereotypes also persist because scholars have thus far failed to challenge them or to test most of them empirically to discover what is true, or partly or conditionally true, and what is false. Many broad and definitive judgments about the substantive content of mass media are still made without actual content analyses of these media. Similarly, most assertions about media effects still lack a solid empirical basis and totally ignore physiologic and psychological factors that determine how human beings process complex information about their world. It has been very tempting to oversimplify the role of the media and do so emphatically to defend questionable generalizations, because the interactions of media systems with other major human institutions is highly complex. Fortunately, the body of empirically tested knowledge has been growing rapidly.

"Media" as Myth

Every discussion about the role of the media immediately runs into the problem that this collective noun creates a mirage. It engenders visions of a fairly uniform body of institutions when, in reality, there is no such thing. If conveying information to large audiences about ongoing events, especially political happenings, is the salient characteristic of news "media," then newspapers, magazines, books, radio, over-the-air and cable television, and the Internet fall into this group. Do they all operate in the same way? Obviously not.

There are vast differences in content, framing, and mode of presentation among various types of news venues and within each venue. That makes it foolhardy to generalize about "the media" because any generalization leads to overly broad, deceptive summary judgments. Political news coverage by the *New York Times*, which is read carefully by political elites worldwide, cannot be equated with news

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coverage by the *Detroit News*, which takes a far more populist, tabloid approach. News broadcasts on C-SPAN, the cable network that presents live coverage of congressional debates and other government activities in the United States, offers far more serious, in-depth political coverage than most local television stations, which summarize the news at 10 PM.

If media vary so widely, can one generalize about their relation to democracy? Again, the answer is "no." The diversity of media is matched by the diversity of social, economic, and political conditions that shape the potential for democracy. The media's effects on politics spring from complex interactions of numerous causal factors that include basic political and media institutions, the sophistication of media technologies, and the characteristics of individual citizens. [These interactions are emphasized by Gunther & Mughan (2000), editors of a volume of comparative essays on the role of the media in democratic and nondemocratic countries.] The ideological orientation of the political elites and the governmental structures under which they operate are particularly potent factors. Because of the diversity of these elements, the interrelation between news media and the success or failure of democracy differs among cultures and subcultures and at various historical periods.

To skirt the myths and stereotypes that bedevil undue generalizations and to make my task more manageable, this essay focuses primarily on major U.S. print and television media that reach very large audiences—such as the *New York Times* or the *Chicago Tribune* and the ABC, CBS, NBC, and CNN networks—and on the Internet. I chose these news media because they are more influential for national politics in the United States than most of their less prominent prototypes.

Overview

My analysis begins with scrutiny of the assumptions and expectations that underlie the hallowed belief that the functions performed by the news media are essential for democracy in the United States. The list of assumptions and expectations is based on a comprehensive survey of pronouncements by First Amendment scholars, U.S. Supreme Court judges, and prominent political leaders throughout American history (Graber 1986). Following the initial analysis, I try to judge how the manner in which major U.S. media are performing these functions affects the quality of American democracy. That assessment encompasses the conflicting appraisals of scholars, including the projections by Internet scholars about the changes brought about by this newest technology. Finally, I attempt to answer the question of whether, on balance, the types of contemporary American media analyzed in this essay are an asset or a detriment to democratic governance in the United States.

PUBLIC VERSUS PRIVATE CONTROL

The relationship between media and government is unusual in the United States because the framers of the Constitution assumed that media in a democracy must be free from government control. Experience-based fears about tyrannical governments led the founders of the United States to create a government of limited

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powers. Checks and balances within the political systems would be strengthened by independent external safeguards provided by news media eager to preserve the people's control over their government.

Government Control as Myth

It is a myth that U.S. media, especially the electronic ones, are free from government controls. Many of the regulations regarding the size and reach of media business combinations, protection of national security, protection of the rights of individuals, and cultural safeguards strongly influence what may and may not be published. Violations are kept in check by the fear of regulatory legislation. In times of war or similar threats to national security, controls have often become quite severe, including laws that prohibited criticism of the government (Hemmer 2000, Tillinghast 2000). Finally, most of the information about government that the media present is supplied by government sources, giving government officials control over what to disclose or conceal and allowing them to present the information from the government's perspective. Whether government's role as the main supplier of news about its activities impairs democracy, and if so how much, remains an unsettled argument. So does the question of whether government control of the media is more likely to be a blessing or a curse.

Private Sector Control Myths

The alternative to government control through ownership of media or through substantial regulation of news content is control by the private sector. In the United States, where media ownership by private parties is the dominant pattern, it means control by self-selected business enterprises that are not beholden to the general public. Many media businesses try to serve the public's interests, but the extent of their public-service orientation varies greatly. Currently, most major media in the United States are owned by large business enterprises whose primary goal must be to produce revenue for the shareholders of their parent companies. That may mean that the public-service orientation yields to profit concerns occasionally or regularly. To serve huge, heterogeneous audiences, media enterprises feature sensationalized news of crime, sex, and violence and oversimplify serious news. Many media critics call that a disservice to democracy because "soft" news replaces "hard" political information; others hail it as praiseworthy populism (Franklin 1997, Brants 1998, Hermes 1997).

Critics are also unhappy that journalists, eager to retain the largest possible audiences, may avoid controversies that might offend sizeable audience segments. News enterprises may reduce the costs of news production by having fewer reporters pursue original stories. They may cut back on expensive foreign news bureaus in favor of parachute journalism, in which home-based commentators fly to the scene of breaking events without necessarily being familiar with the local political and cultural environment that has shaped these events.

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One of the most damning accusations leveled against commercialized media in the United States is that they corrupt the election process by charging candidates money to broadcast their messages. That makes campaigning very expensive. Consequently, candidates largely limit themselves to 30-second advertisements that are apt to confuse voters rather than enlightening them. The ads are often nasty in tone and provoke anger that may then cloud judgments or keep voters away from the polls (Just et al. 1996, Fallows 1996).

Steep campaigning costs force candidates to spend inordinate amounts of time on fundraising rather than attending to politics. High costs prevent poor candidates from entering the race and allow rich candidates to "buy" elections. Wealthy contributors of large sums of money may have a better than average chance to influence politics. The turn to private commercial media has thus produced major hazards for democracy in the United States that were not expected when the restraints on major government controls of media were incorporated into the Constitution.

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WHAT IS EXPECTED FROM THE MEDIA?

How can the media support American democracy so that their constitutionally protected privilege seems warranted? As First Amendment scholars and other prominent Americans see it, the press should do four things: (*a*) provide a forum for discussion of diverse, often conflicting ideas; (*b*) give voice to public opinion; (*c*) serve as citizens' eyes and ears to survey the political scene and the performance of politicians; and (*d*) act as a public watchdog that barks loudly when it encounters misbehavior, corruption, and abuses of power in the halls of government. A broad array of other requirements have also been mentioned occasionally, but they are subsumed in the four basic categories (Gurevitch & Blumler 1990, Curran 1996).

All of these expectations are based on the assumption that ideal democracy equates to participatory democracy, where politically well-informed citizens play an active role in government. This assumption, based on models dating back to ancient Greece, is questionable on multiple grounds. Is participatory democracy really feasible when modern mass publics are far too large to engage in policy debates where citizens have a reasonable chance to make themselves heard? Is it practical given the complexity of the public policy issues that face modern societies and often require insights based on high-level technical expertise? And is it realistic considering the disinclination of modern citizens to engage in such debates? Is it even the ideal form of democracy, or would other forms, such as direct democracy or communitarian democracy, provide better models (Becker & Slaton 2000, Dahlberg 2001)?

Mass Media and the Marketplace of Ideas

Among the contributions expected from American media is the provision of a forum for wide discussion of diverse, often conflicting ideas. Here again we encounter a number of questionable assumptions. Among them is the assumption that the

public dialogue generated by media coverage will bring out the truth in political controversies so that the best policies can emerge. In the words of the U.S. Supreme Court, in "an uninhibited marketplace of ideas" the "truth will ultimately prevail" because many viewpoints will be heard (*Red Lion Broadcasting Co. v. FCC* 1969, p. 389). In reality, the cacophony of voices in today's marketplace of ideas often confuses nonexperts more than it enlightens them.

The problem is made worse by the "neutrality" norm that American journalists prize. That norm precludes telling their audiences where the "truth" might lie. Instead, the news is flooded with comments by "expert" sources with diametrically opposed opinions. That makes it difficult for lay people to judge the merits of complex policies (Neuman 1986, Zaller 1994). Of course, what is true and untrue in the policy realm, and the criteria by which policy alternatives should be judged, are matters of subjective choice. The marketplace of ideas, stocked with diverse news stories, gives little guidance.

A second assumption about the marketplace of ideas is that genuine news diversity requires that a large number of independent journalistic enterprises, representing many different perspectives on politics, must select and present the news. Many critics believe that increasing concentration of news enterprises precludes such diversity (Bagdikian 1996, Alger 1998, Picard 1998, Compaine & Gomery 2000, McChesney 2000). News media have multiplied steadily, but many are controlled by the same large business enterprises. In fact, the legal structure of the United States does not do well in promoting the establishment of large numbers of independent media and keeping them from combining. Media concentration, the critics claim, explains why so many of the largest media, like the major television networks, are rivals in conformity when they select and frame news stories (Picard 1998, Schudson 2002).

Research evidence does not substantiate the claim that the concentration of media enterprises in the United States since the 1980s has amounted to a dangerous shrinking of the interests represented by media voices. Although it has some facets of truth, the claim is largely a myth (Picard 1998). The number of media competing for audiences does not necessarily determine the diversity of viewpoints that are publicly aired. Media tycoons who control numerous media enterprises, such as Rupert Murdoch, often sponsor vastly different news outlets. Murdoch, for example, simultaneously controls a popular British tabloid, the *Sun*, and the venerable and elite London *Times* (Gunther & Mughan 2000). It is true that American media often are rivals in conformity, framing the news in line with political mainstream orientations. But that happens because they share notions about what is newsworthy and what appeals to their particular publics and because they tap the same sources of information.

What that mainstream orientation means for the quality of democracy is unclear. It is a typical "which came first, the chicken or the egg?" puzzle. Most Americans' political views are mainstream, and there is no evidence that they flock in large numbers to the extremist views available from alternative media and the Internet. So, is democracy served well or poorly when the media reflect the majority's

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approach to politics? The answer depends on one's political orientation. Many scholars and pundits whose ideology is far from the political mainstream cite the emphasis on mainstream orientations as a serious flaw in media content (Schiller 1989, McChesney 2000). They allege that, by favoring mainstream capitalist ideology, media help to perpetuate it. News stories are "messages in code about the nature of society, the nature of productive relations within the media themselves and institutional domains and social processes" (Altheide 1984, p. 478). In the eyes of critics, the media do not offer the electorate multiple, diverse frames of the many political issues that citizens should scrutinize. This is especially true in the foreign policy realm. Most discussions of U.S. foreign policies are presented from the perspective of the United States, which left-wing critics consider imperialist.

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Mass Media as Voices for Public Opinions

Mass media in American democracy are expected to give voice to public opinion so that the government will know where majorities and minorities stand. The view that the media frame the news to reflect the opinion of various publics or the opinions of the majority is another myth that has little relation to political realities. Nonetheless, it has major consequences because political observers often equate the thrust of media coverage with a single, unanimous public opinion when such unanimity is a myth.

The press cannot function as a megaphone for public opinions because it does not keep in regular touch with various factions among the public. Journalists gather most of their information for news stories from media beats representing selected public and private institutions but not the mass public. The opinions of elites are featured while the views of the mainstream public are slighted; the views of ideological dissenters are largely ignored. Overall, the opinions of the mass public are treated as quaintly interesting but not necessarily consequential, except in connection with electoral politics and situations in which public support and compliance are essential. The closest that the mass media come to reporting details of public opinion are their reports of public opinion polls taken by their own or other organizations. Leaving aside the many questions that have been raised about how accurately public opinion polls reflect public views, the number of issues about which its opinions are reported is minuscule compared with the number of important public policy issues facing the nation at any particular time (Traugott & Lavrakas 2000, Asher 2001).

Journalists often claim to speak for the public but deny vehemently that this is an agency relationship in which publics have the right to insist that news stories report their opinions. On the whole, the news media have not been generous in granting access to the many viewpoints that people would like to air. To the contrary, political positions favored by a particular medium may be at odds with the views of its audience. Journalists tend to be more liberal about social policies and more conservative about economic policies than much of their audience (Weaver & Wilhoit 1996). Their stories reflect their orientation to varying degrees. Such

discrepancies may explain why almost half of the public expresses only limited confidence in the accuracy of the media (Pew 1998a).

The notion that the media are a major catalyst of and contributor to public opinions is also at odds with the fact that average Americans do not form opinions on most political issues, whether or not the information to do so is available. If they do form opinions, these do not necessarily mirror the views presented in the media even when these views have been prominent (Zaller 2001). For these reasons, the accusation that the media hurt participatory democracy by destroying trust in government through cynical coverage rings hollow. Research does, indeed, show that trust in government dips when the public is plied with negative news that seems credible (Capella & Jamieson 1997, Rahn & Rudolph 2001). But, like other political phenomena, such attitudes are ephemeral and that should be reflected in the charges.

Public feelings of trust appear to be driven more by personal experiences and media reports about political events and the performance of politicians than by an excessively hostile tone of the media coverage of these events (Nye et al. 1997, Miller & Listhaug 1999). That fact was well illustrated by the soaring trust in government and the President's job approval ratings that followed the terrorist attack on the United States in 2001. The ratings dropped as soon as news stories about inattention to danger signals raised questions in people's minds about the effectiveness of the government in handling terrorism. Like most reported public opinions, trust in government depends heavily on the political situations that provide the context within which the public is forming the opinions that it relays to pollsters (Pew 1998b, Bishop 2001). Further exoneration of the media from the charge of promoting cynicism comes from research evidence that the segments of the public who pay most attention to news stories and are most receptive to new information display the highest sense of political efficacy and trust in government (Bennett et al. 1999, Norris 2000a,b).

Still, the press supplies the raw material from which public opinions are formed, so there is indeed a connection between the press and public opinions. If the press fails to alert people to information that they need to judge major aspects of the political scene, citizens' capacity to influence public officials suffers. Although the notion that people form their opinions based on what the media report is simplistic, news media can set the agenda for political thinking—the subject matter to which people will pay attention—without necessarily determining what they will think about these issues. Journalists' story choices may also influence the mental connections that people make between issues. For example, the issue of pay increases for police officers elicits different audience responses depending on whether the audience was primed by a story about police brutality or by a recollection of the events of September 11, 2001 (Iyengar 1991).

The Surveillance Function

The media are expected to serve as eyes and ears for citizens, who need to monitor the soundness of policies and the performance of politicians. The unstated

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assumption is that the media have the ability, resources, inclination, and mandate to perform oversight functions. In reality, their powers are very limited and no match for the power of politicians to hide what they are doing. The media lack subpoena powers to trace hidden information. They must depend on what is voluntarily supplied or what emerges when insiders leak information to the press. They also lack sufficient money and manpower for systematic oversight. Besides, they do not consider surveillance a compelling mandate. This is why the media usually wait for leaks and tips before delving into questionable political activities, rather than checking the activities of politicians routinely. Even then journalists rarely act unless the activities involved seem clear and easily investigated and unless the investigation seems likely to produce a newsworthy, appealing story. Impending institutional failures and the public's need to know about them have been insufficient to stimulate major investigations (Lang & Lang 1983, Jamieson & Waldman 2003).

The Watchdog Function

The situation is the same with regard to monitoring misbehavior, corruption, and abuses of power by government. Investigative journalism has enjoyed a few spectacular successes—unearthing the Watergate scandal in the Nixon administration, disclosing the My Lai massacre during the Vietnam War, reporting on excesses by CIA and FBI agents, and detailing the activities of corrupt individual politicians. But such investigations have been exceptional, not routine (Protess et al. 1991, Sabato et al. 2000). However, the monitoring function has a deterrent effect that may be more significant than the actual investigations of wrong-doing. Like all non-happenings, the extent of deterrence is hard to measure.

THE PERFORMANCE RECORD

Structural Obstacles

How well have major U.S. media performed the democracy-sustaining functions expected of them? It is clear that they have not done well, largely because they lack the power, resources, structure, and inclination to perform tasks that have become impossible to handle in a huge, heterogeneous country that must cope with extraordinarily complex political conditions. The news media, as Patterson (1993) has aptly described them, are a "miscast institution."

The media are not structured to perform the functions that America's founders expected of them. They do not operate as small, independent, diverse enterprises. Economies of scale have forced smaller units to merge with larger ones. Aside from the Internet, they are not common carriers open to all who desire to be heard. The media are not designed for systematic surveillance of the government and public opinion. There simply is too much news to cover and report on a daily basis. Journalists are often chided for providing too little context for news stories. Yet, because of time constraints, especially on television, they cannot repeat familiar contextual information at the expense of new elements of a perennial story. For example,

the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians is decades old. There has been very little substantive change in the basic issues and the types of policies that have been proposed for dealing with them. Thus, journalists do not repeat this background information, hoping that audiences still remember the essence of past stories.

The media have no mandate to teach the public, nor has the public an obligation to learn from them. Most journalists therefore do not see themselves as teachers, and most audience members do not associate reading or watching or listening to political news with sitting in a classroom learning lessons that must be committed to memory. The capacity of audiences to absorb the contents of news stories is quite limited. So is their time and inclination to study the news. Attention to news is a leisure-time activity for most people, and leisure time is scarce.

Rather than being a venue for teaching civic knowledge, the media, as currently structured, are for-profit enterprises that must be concerned about their financial bottom line. Journalists know that average citizens are only mildly interested in the political life that surrounds them. People devour news about crime, disaster, and sexual exploits but slight the in-depth political analyses offered periodically by newspapers and television documentaries. Journalists therefore believe that they can serve their clients best by making the news entertaining. Consequently, news selection criteria relate more to audience appeal than to the political significance of stories or their relevance to civic goals. Under these circumstances, the surprise is not that media have failed to perform the functions that are deemed so essential for participatory democracy, but that they have retained a public-service orientation at all.

Surveillance Failures

Above all other criticisms, the media have been accused of major shortcomings in political surveillance, compounded by shallow presentations and a failure to feature diverse points of view. They do not assess the soundness of policies and the performance of politicians adequately to make a vigorous participatory democracy possible. As media critic Postman (1985, p. 141) has said about television, which is the most widely used information source, "it is a medium which presents information in a form that renders it simplistic, nonsubstantive, nonhistorical and noncontextual; that is to say information packaged as entertainment."

Patterson (1993) has highlighted numerous specific complaints about news quality. He accuses the media of failing to discuss the likely consequences of various types of political decisions. They may speculate about future events but they rarely tell their audiences what the political impact is likely to be. Talk about the horse-race aspects of elections is plentiful during campaigns, whereas analyses of the capabilities of various candidates are slighted. The media rarely point out patterns in political developments; they approach political happenings as if they were a series of discrete events. They emphasize novel twists that may be insignificant while ignoring long-term continuities. Lengthy analytical pieces are rare. The media favor stereotypes and perpetuate them because they are dramatic and easy to understand, rather than offering nuanced comments.

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News Dosages for Political Health

The accusation that the current news supply is inadequate for the needs of citizens raises the highly controversial issue of what the public needs to know to be effective citizens (Popkin 1994, Rahn et al. 1994, Delli Carpini & Keeter 1996, Norris 2000a,b, Graber 2001). I have argued elsewhere (Graber 2001) that there is no uniform, widely accepted answer to that question. Neither scholars nor pundits nor average Americans agree what issues people need to be informed about to perform citizenship tasks adequately and how detailed their knowledge must be. Many theorists allege that the fully informed, participatory citizen is the ideal model and that the adequacy of media coverage should be assessed from that perspective. But this ideal citizen simply does not exist and cannot exist in most advanced industrialized societies, especially in large countries. This is why a major shift in the model of citizenship was needed to keep pace with political and social developments (Lupia & McCubbins 1998, Popkin & Dimock 1999, Neuman et al. 1992).

Schudson pointed that out in a 1999 keynote address on "The Transformation of Civic Life." Schudson describes successive stages of citizenship from the "deferential citizen" of the eighteenth century to the "partisan citizen" prior to World War I to the "informed citizen" who was in vogue until the 1960s to the "rights-bearing citizen" of the present day. The concept of the rights-bearing or "monitorial" citizen

> does not imply that citizens should know all the issues all of the time. It implies that they should be informed enough and alert enough to identify danger to their personal good and danger to the public good. When such danger appears on the horizon, they should have the resources—in trusted relationships, in political parties and elected officials, in relationships to interest groups and other trustees of their concerns, in knowledge of and access to the courts as well as the electoral system, and in relevant information sources to jump into the fray and make a lot of noise. (Schudson n.d., p. 23)

The modern press assists the monitorial citizen by surveying what government does and by critiquing its activities (Schudson 1998).

Do average Americans have sufficient political knowledge to cope with their duties as monitorial citizens? The answer is "yes." Research shows (e.g., Popkin 1994, Lupia & McCubbins 1998, Graber 2001) that the heuristics developed by most Americans to vote in elections and to participate in political discussions at home and in the workplace seem quite serviceable, although they are remote from the ideal of the fully informed citizen who enjoys in-depth knowledge about all aspects of politics. Even if that ideal were attainable, it would be impractical for most citizens in our complex age when citizens must attend to many other pursuits besides politics.

Citizens themselves feel that they are adequately informed by current media fare. In response to pollsters' questions, most citizens say that television news,

which is the most widely used information source, provides them with sufficient information to carry out their civic functions. A majority of viewers (61%) claim to be very or fairly satisfied with television offerings in general, and viewers are overwhelmingly (85%) satisfied with news offerings. When asked "How good of a job does the evening news do in summing up the events of the day?" 18% of the respondents in a 1998 nationwide poll gave it an "excellent" rating and 50% called it "good," while 21% said it was "only fair" and 4% labeled it "poor." Seven percent gave no ratings (Pew 1998a).

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Myths About News Quality

There are also many myths concerning the quality of media performance. It is far from stellar, as reflected in the critics' complaints. Still, if one judges adequacy by the availability of political news, the media are far better than their reputation (Graber 2001). Content analysis of the early evening national newscasts on ABC, CBS, CNN, and NBC for several months in 1997 and 1998 shows that over the course of a single week, viewers received roughly 43 min of foreign news, 32 min of general domestic stories, 30 min of news dealing with various social issues, 24 min of news about the environment, and 16 min of economic news. A viewer who watched the nightly 30-min network news six days per week and a 60-min CNN newscast once a week would get a political lesson lasting 2 h 24 min. That is almost equivalent to the weekly classroom time of a student enrolled in a political science college course, although it lacks tests and grades, which are a powerful incentive for learning.

To evaluate the overall quality of the news supply available to the American public requires looking at all the rivulets in the news stream, rather than examining single sources only, as is commonly done. A thorough examination (Norris 2001, Bimber 2003) shows that despite the decline of traditional political fare in many print and electronic news venues, the supply of political information, including hard political news, has never been more abundant when one considers the totality of offerings, including those available on the Internet. Gaps in one venue or one news format tend to be filled by programming in other venues or other formats. For example, although political documentaries on television have diminished, prime-time television news magazines now supply many in-depth and investigative stories that television news formerly provided. However, most people do not take full advantage of the rich feast.

At times, research problems intensify misconceptions about the quality and quantity of media coverage of particular topics. Even when content appraisals are based on systematic content analysis, these analyses usually have a very short focus. For example, most analyses of issue coverage during a U.S. presidential election focus on the last two months of the campaign and generally encompass a very small number of media. They ignore the information available earlier in the campaign as well as the fact that audiences have a large fund of prior information about many issues. Often, they count only one or two issues mentioned

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in a news story and ignore the rest, creating serious undercounts (Althaus et al. 2001).

Schudson (1998) does not mention that the modern citizen's focus of concern as a monitor of civic life is close to home rather than at the national or international level and that the modern rights-bearing citizen pays greater attention to economic and social issues than to traditional politics. But that, too, is part of the new package of citizenship concerns. Accordingly, the thrust of the information reported by the media has shifted, leaving media critics dismayed. There is greater emphasis on political issues that involve social and economic policies, including substantially more stories about business, health care, and crime, than on traditional reports about political maneuvers in the nation's capital and the activities of the President.

For example, a comparison of news offerings on ABC, CBS, NBC, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, and *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines over a 20-year span between 1977 and 1997 shows a 21% reduction in traditional political news and a 15% increase in economic and social news, although the pattern is uneven (Committee of Concerned Journalists 1999). The *New York Times*, for example, increased traditional political coverage, while *Time* magazine decreased it by more than 50%. The entertainment category, which includes sports and weather, grew only slightly—an average of only three percentage points—which runs counter to widespread stereotypes that entertainment features are mushrooming. Believers in the informed-citizen model regret changes in focus as a harmful deviation from supplying participatory citizens with traditional political news. But these changes are in tune with monitorial citizenship, which encourages citizens to monitor political issues selectively.

The continued willingness of the public to expose itself regularly to large amounts of national and international news nonetheless suggests that people, though frustrated with run-of-the-mill politics and political news, have not been alienated from the political process by the news media, as some critics allege. They are eager to learn information, especially when its salience is clear (Key 1965, Page & Shapiro 1991, Popkin 1994, Kuklinski et al. 2001). In fact, 87% of the public actually claims to enjoy keeping up with the news even though most of it does not interest them (Pew 1998a).

Despite these high rates of satisfaction among the public, academic critics and pundits excoriate television, complaining that it supplies inadequate political information to allow citizens to perform their civic duties. The wide divergence between the critics' harshly negative judgments and the much more positive appraisals of average citizens springs from their respective expectations. The critics base their expectations about what citizens ought to know about politics on the traditional model of the fully informed political actor. Rather than concentrating their analyses on knowledge that is essential to performing ordinary civic tasks, such as voting and political discussions, the critics focus on precisely remembered factual knowledge about past and current people and events. They judge civic intelligence by the ability to respond to questions with readily measurable facts and figures.

THE INTERNET AS PANACEA

Does Internet technology enhance the capability of the news media to perform the functions deemed essential for participatory democracy?

Major Contributions

It does so in part, although it cannot overcome the main physical and physiological barriers to participatory citizenship (Norris 2001, Bimber 2003). Compared with traditional media, it supplies information collected by a wider array of sources who represent more diverse viewpoints. Many of these sources are linked to traditional news media and public officials. They have been joined by thousands of political units, such as cities, counties, police departments, and school systems, that now have websites. These websites offer citizens more information than ever available before, making government more understandable, transparent, and accountable. Many of the sites permit and often invite two-way communication via the Web or email. Some of them enable citizens to observe and participate in legislative sessions and town meetings (Tsagarousianou et al. 1998, Bimber 1999). Opportunities for direct access to politicians at all levels, including the President and members of Congress, have mushroomed because nearly all have websites that set forth their political activities and invite comments and questions. However, meaningful responses from such officials still remain scarce (Davis & Owen 1998, Davis 1999).

Institutional websites are outnumbered by those of millions of people from all walks of life. Thousands of these websites provide political information. Some present information in regular news formats, enriched by links to websites that supply more in-depth information. Others specialize in detailed analyses of specific issues, such as global warming or prescription drugs for the elderly. Average citizens can reach and use this information faster and more easily and cheaply than ever before.

Many political issues have become the focus for usenet groups where interested citizens can engage in often spirited conversation with others who care about the same topics (Hill & Hughes 1998, Bucy & Gregson 2001). As Bucy & Gregson summarize it (2001, p. 369), "Quite possibly, the internet/world wide web presents more political information and opportunities for civic engagement than has [sic] ever existed." The Internet comes closer to being a "common carrier" open to the messages of all who desire to speak than any previous technology, and people from all walks of life have learned to use it. Since people's interests vary, the notion that one type of news coverage can serve all needs is naive. Diverse audiences are better served when the rich diet of news available on the Internet covers a broad array of topics, framed in multiple ways, and presented at various levels of sophistication.

Major Drawbacks

Still, the reality is not as rosy as some of the glowing appraisals suggest (Barber 1998, Hill & Hughes 1998, Keck & Sikkink 1998). Use of the Internet for political purposes has been disappointingly sparse compared with use for entertainment or

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business purposes. It is a political asset that is far from reaching its full potential and may never do so (Margolis & Resnick 2002, Bimber 2003, Graber et al. 2003). Access to audiences remains problematic. It is often difficult for news sources who are unfamiliar to the public to find audiences who will pay attention to their messages. Most of those who preach on the Internet preach primarily to those who are already converted.

The societal segments who already are immersed in valuable information—the well-educated and economically secure—dominate in Internet use. In that sense, the Internet contributes to inequality of opportunity rather than diminishing it. Nonetheless, the fact that subsets of politically engaged citizens are scrutinizing political activities and communicating their views to public officials decentralizes and democratizes political communication. Political and ideological dykes restricting information circulation have become porous.

When it comes to monitoring the activities of politicians, including performing the watchdog function, Internet news suppliers face the same problems as traditional media. Surveillance is better because more information is available from government and private websites and even from sources outside the United States. But the government's ability to hide what it does not wish to disclose remains formidable.

Along with the many other new media that have sprouted in recent decades, the Internet poses fragmentation problems for democracy. With audiences dividing their attention among more news venues, the bond of shared information that ties communities together may be vanishing. That loss puts democratic governance at risk because it depends on shared values and willingness to focus on a common agenda for public action. When shared social norms are diminished, norms of tolerance that are essential to democracy may weaken. Because of the diversity of information sources, Americans now have more variegated political agendas than ever before. There is a danger of fragmentation that may destroy the public sphere where people can discuss joint concerns, even though they may disagree about what solutions should be attempted (Dahlgren 2001, Sunstein 2001).

When people engage in more selective exposure to the media, their scope of interests tends to shrink. With more information and entertainment available, they may spend less time on political news. They may be lured away from the public sphere into their own communication ghettoes (Swanson 1997, Bennett 1998, Entman & Herbst 2001). Audience tallies show that this does indeed happen (Pew 2000). The upshot may be widening of cultural and knowledge gaps in society. Persuaders can then target their messages more effectively to the most receptive audiences. The threat of undue persuasion has become a major concern in an era when politicians hire public relations experts to craft their messages (Farrel 1996, Mayhew 1997, Kurtz 1998, Mancini 1999).

THE BALANCE SHEET

How could American democracy survive for more than 200 years when the news media, which are presumably essential for democratic governance, are badly flawed and the public shuns serious politics? This essay has recorded some of the

public's and the media's serious shortcomings in surveillance of the political scene, in monitoring politicians and performing the watchdog role, and in mirroring America's vast array of public opinions (Schmitter & Karl 1991, Delli Carpini & Keeter 1996, Semetko 1996). The unavoidable verdict is that even the best U.S. media currently fall short of providing even the limited information needed by the monitorial citizen. For its part, the public fails to play the participatory citizenship role.

However, that verdict must be put into perspective. It is predicated on applying standards based on the prevailing myths about a politically well-informed participatory citizenry that requires ample hard news about all major political issues facing the nation. Stereotypes have exaggerated the media's failures to perform as handmaidens of democracy. The descriptions of the information diet offered by media critics are often mere caricatures that highlight its worst features. In fact, most print and electronic news media, except for tabloids, serve the four basic functions identified above reasonably well.

They serve as a forum of limited discussion of conflicting elite views about numerous political issues. The range of sources interviewed for news stories and the views that are publicized generally fluctuate only narrowly around the political center and many important issues are slighted. Still, news currently alerts the public to the range of political alternatives that have a chance to be selected because they are within the mainstream and propounded by influential individuals or groups.

When it comes to reflecting the opinions of their various publics, individual news venues often fall short. Still, they know that they cannot stray too far afield lest they lose their audiences. Hence they cling to the mainstream. For their part, the audience may not mirror the opinions expressed in the media but they use news stories as raw materials for shaping their own views. That assures that the gaps between media images and public opinions rarely become huge. Collectively, when public officials and private parties sample news offerings nationwide, they receive a reasonably good picture of the prevailing trends of opinions.

Measured against ideal standards, the surveillance and watchdog functions are also poorly performed by most news media. That harsh verdict softens substantially when one considers the practical obstacles to routine political surveillance and to investigative political journalism. Overall, surveillance of the political scene and monitoring of politicians have improved steadily in recent decades thanks to the many new media venues, including the Internet. Investigative journalism has had some spectacular successes and is a sword of Damocles that can scare corruptible politicians away from misdeeds.

A realistic standard of news evaluation based on actualities and feasible options also requires acknowledging that the quantity and quality of news vary widely among the thousands of news venues that are currently readily available in the United States. Many of these venues earn high ratings even from the severest critics of current media offerings. More would do so if they were judged by scientific content measurements rather than stereotypes and if content adequacy judgments were gauged by the needs of monitorial citizens.

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Realistic standards also require foregoing criticism of conditions that are intrinsically unchangeable. News organizations cannot collect all available information and disseminate it rapidly. Much important information will never be collected or reported until it is too late to be useful. The promise of the *New York Times* that it offers "all the news that is fit to print" is a cruel joke. The capacity of citizens to pay attention to all they need to know is similarly limited because human capacity to absorb and process information is physiologically and psychologically bounded, and time available for dealing with citizenship concerns is short.

Nonetheless, focus-group evidence reveals that people from all walks of life are far more sophisticated about politics than currently used civic IQ tests indicate (Gamson 2001, Graber 2001). Current tests call for readily measurable recall of specific facts and figures that most people never store in their memories or forget rapidly. Like the drunkard who looks for his lost keys under the lamppost because the light is better, even though he dropped them elsewhere, most current tests miss their targets. Investigators fail to ask the productive, open-ended questions that allow citizens to frame their own responses in ways dictated by how they encoded information originally.

When people are allowed to tell what interests them and what they know, using their own words rather than responding to questions framed by investigators, the harvest of significant political information tends to be rich. Such open-ended tests reveal that most people know and use shortcuts for making sound political decisions, even when their detailed factual knowledge is sparse. For example, party labels in news stories allow them to infer which policies best serve their interests, and brief biographies furnish a basis for identifying trustworthy leaders whose opinions citizens then can adopt.

Granted that news media serve the public far better than their current reputation suggests and that monitorial citizens deserve upgraded ratings for political understanding and participation, is it enough? Can democracy still thrive? To answer that question requires going beyond the myth that the survival of democracy hinges predominantly on an excellent free press that supports effective, participatory citizenship. The focus must be expanded beyond the media/citizen dynamic to the interaction of the media with other parts of the political system. This essay has concentrated on those aspects of media performance by which media support of democratic governance has been traditionally judged; so I have not examined equally, if not more, important aspects of democratization in which the media have had a powerful influence. I refer to the impact of the media on the political system in general and on various political institutions.

To give a few examples: Scholars have chronicled how media coverage of the President affects his relationship with Congress, including his ability to have his legislative priorities enacted (Kernell 1997). Presidents who "go public" by asking citizens to support their policies may thereby use the news media to weaken Congress and strengthen the presidency. In fact, mobilization of the public via the media is a typical example of the two-step process in which elites first are aroused by news stories and then transmit their concerns to the public. Media

coverage that mobilized elite opposition to the Vietnam War is another example. It ultimately generated public demands for major shifts in U.S. foreign policy (Braestrup 1983). Media coverage of obscure political parties and candidates occasionally has allowed them to emerge from the shadows, although it has rarely made them winners. These types of media impacts affect the quality of democracy even when mass publics are not involved initially.

Abroad, the media have been praised as crucial actors in promoting democracy in formerly authoritarian countries, either by showing images of thriving democratic societies or by depicting the weaknesses of dictatorships. These instances point to the vast influence modern media have had in promoting democratic governance at opportune moments in history. Media may not promote democracy very vigorously on a daily basis while still performing a key role in times of crisis. At such times, their power grows also because people who normally ignore the news flock to the media. For example, during the period following the presidential election of 2000, when control of that vital office was at stake, news audiences rose by as much as 250% on CNN and 440% on Fox news. Media coverage of the various complex aspects of that situation was far more detailed and helpful than during less critical times.

In a nutshell, democracy manages to function, albeit imperfectly, despite a media system that gives it too little support much of the time. As Gunther & Mughan (2000) concluded after studying the media/democracy interface in 10 politically diverse countries, what seems to matter most is the spirit in which political elites conduct the affairs of government. The historical evidence that they cite provides convincing proof that democracy is safe in political cultures pervaded by democratic principles, even when some practices stray from these principles. If that is true, then American democracy seems secure as long as American governments, American journalists, and the American public continue to be ideologically committed to democracy. In fact, governance is apt to become increasingly democratic. The history of the broadening of the suffrage in the United States and the civil rights movement are examples. American democracy does not work nearly as well as one would hope, and flaws in media offerings and citizen actions must share the blame. But, on balance, American democracy has managed to sustain its chief goals despite the imperfections of its tools.

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