The Eroding Boundaries between News and Entertainment and What They Mean for Democratic Politics

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INTRODUCTION: THE CHALLENGE OF THE NEW MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, concerns have been raised over the deterioration in the quality of information available to citizens in the United States and around the globe. Analysts have typically blamed “infotainment”, a blurring of the lines between “news” and “entertainment,” or “fake news,” the collapse of distinctions between fact and fiction. Typically, the erasure of these boundaries is viewed with alarm, seen as a sometimes economic, sometimes cultural challenge to journalism’s preeminent status as the nation’s gatekeeper of the public interest.

As we write, in August of 2019, new questions emerge almost daily about the connection between a rapidly changing media environment and the reliability of the political information used by citizens in the United States and many other democracies. From Donald Trump in 2016 to Volodymyr Zelensky, a comedian elected President of Ukraine in May 2019, figures from the world of entertainment have been elected to lead their nations despite having no previous political experience. Investigative journalists at “prestige press” institutions such as The New York Times, Washington Post, and television news divisions, as well as newer online sites like Politico, Axios, and Slate have implicated the basic business models of social media giants like Facebook, Twitter, and Google (i.e., selling information about their users to interested third-parties) in the strategic spread of “fake news” designed to influence the outcome of American elections.

Around the globe, many democratic elections are preceded by concerns about the use of false news stories to sway voters. Months prior to Czech Republic presidential elections in January 2018, for example, a site with a history of circulating fake news with a pro-Russian slant published accusations that the main challenger was a pedophile who had collaborated with the secret police in the 1980s (Magra, 2018). As is usually the case, it is unclear what effect this had on the outcome of the election, but the pro-Russian, anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim incumbent was re-elected (Santorajan, 2018). Other instances of fake news aimed at swaying voters became issues in French, Italian, German, and Spanish elections (Magra, 2018).

In this chapter, we argue that anxiety over the rise of infotainment is less about the blurring of lines between news and entertainment or fact and fiction (lines virtually impossible to draw in any intellectually satisfying way) and more about uncertainty resulting from the dramatic changes occurring in the media environment over the last two decades. These changes have
enormous consequences for the ways in which political information is and will be produced, consumed, and circulated in the twenty-first century. A sophisticated understanding of the potentials and pitfalls for democracy of this new media environment depends upon an historical and ethical perspective that is not dependent upon a priori assumptions, rooted in dubious conclusions from the recent past, about the appropriate forms or sources of political information. We suggest a more pragmatic approach, drawing upon the historical development of what we call media regimes in the United States and their role in structuring the patterns and practices of ordinary citizens as they search for political information.

MEDIA REGIMES AND CITIZENSHIP

For our purposes, we define a media regime as an historically specific more or less stable institutional arrangement of the state, culture, and economy that structures how mediated information is provided to the public. Once in place, a media regime organizes the gates through which information about culture, politics, and economics passes, thus shaping the discursive environment in which such topics are discussed, understood, and acted on. At most points in time, the structure of this gate-keeping process is invisible, with elites, citizens, and scholars tacitly accepting as natural and unproblematic the rules by which information is disseminated. Controversy, when it occurs, centers on perceived violations of the rules rather than on the appropriateness of the rules themselves. A good example is when a journalist is seen as violating the norms of objectivity or the confidentiality of an anonymous source.

Periodically, however, economic, cultural, political, or technological changes lead to disjunctions between existing media regimes and actual practices (for example, when new technologies, such as cable or the Internet, challenge the dominant role of a particular set of media elites, such as the news divisions of the television networks). When the contradictions between existing rules and actual practice become too great to ignore, normally unexamined assumptions underlying a particular media regime become more visible and more likely to be challenged, opening up the possibility of “regime change.” Robert McChesney defines such moments as “critical junctures,” while Paul Starr defines such periods as “constitutive moments” (McChesney, 2007; Starr, 2004). As McChesney argues, we are at just such a critical juncture. It is revealing to recall briefly past critical junctures and the resulting debates and policies over media and democracy which shaped previous American media regimes.

For example, economic, political, and cultural changes occurring during the early part of the twentieth century, coupled with the emergence of radio and later television, challenged the existing media regime (dominated by newspapers and their owners). This disjunction set off a series of very public struggles over fundamental issues such as the relative merits of newspapers versus radio or television as a source of public information, the appropriate balance between public and private ownership, commercialization, which elites should communicate with the polity and how they should do so, and even the appropriate role of citizens in a democracy (McChesney, 1993).

By the middle of the twentieth century, a more or less stable new media regime had emerged. It consisted of the increasing dominance of electronic over print media, concentrated ownership of a shrinking number of media outlets, a public service obligation imposed on radio and television networks in exchange for the use of the public airwaves, and, finally, heightened status for professional journalists who would mediate between political leaders and the citizenry. It was through the emergence of this new regime (called “The Golden Age of Broadcast News” by Jon Katz, 1997), with its particular combination of media institutions, norms, processes and actors,
that familiar distinctions such as news versus entertainment and the central role of professional journalists as gatekeepers came to take on their unquestioned, authoritative meaning.

In this regime, the “news media” became gatekeepers of the public agenda, the source of information about pressing issues of the day, and the public space in which (mainly elites) debated these issues. Significantly, this regime depended upon a limited number of gates through which political information would pass to citizens: the three network news broadcasts and a single newspaper for most Americans. The vigorous defenders of Ted Koppel and Nightline, for example, accepted the assumptions of this media regime.

Much academic research buttressed the underlying assumptions of this regime. Based upon decades of survey research, it was assumed that the public was largely uninterested in politics and could only be periodically roused around elections, or in times of crisis. This generally apathetic and poorly informed citizenry would receive all they needed to know about the political world if they turned to the evening news for 30 minutes a day, and perhaps, for the more engaged, read a newspaper or news magazine. Once tuned in, professional journalists would provide citizens with the information they needed to make wise decisions—primarily by voting.

When it came to examining the political influence of the media, scholars focused almost exclusively on media explicitly labeled as political by producers: news broadcasts, news and editorial sections of print media, political advertisements, and so forth. It’s also significant that from the early days of empirical communications research by Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues in the 1940s (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944) through the methodologically sophisticated work of scholars like Donald Kinder, Shanto Iyengar and Kinder (1987), Iyengar (1991), Iyengar & Reeves, (1997), Diana Mutz, Sniderman, and Brody (1996), or Robert Entman (1989, 2004)), the centrality of media gatekeeping has been assumed. Almost without exception, researchers assumed (sometimes explicitly, more often implicitly) that between the booming, buzzing, blooming confusion of the political world and the limited time and capacity of ordinary citizens stood professional journalists who, in negotiation with political elites, would determine what information passed through these gates to the general public. It was primarily at a limited number of such gates that the public would gather to learn about politics.

From the perspective of the early twenty-first century, it is clear that this whole line of analysis and the media regime within which it is situated emerged from a very particular media environment. The basic features of this environment and how much has changed over the last two decades is illustrated by the fact that in 1982, the year in which Iyengar and Kinder (1987) were doing their influential research on the political influence of the broadcast news, the average American home received 10 television channels, 20 percent of American homes had a VCR, fewer than two million personal computers were sold, and the Internet, DVDs, cell phones, satellite television, and so forth were not available to a mass market.

Since that time, however, changes in the media environment have severely undermined the regime of the “Golden Age of Broadcast Journalism.” The average American household now has three television sets and access to more than a 120 television channels, not including internet-based providers such as Hulu or Netflix. Eighty-seven percent of households have a DVD player and just under 50 percent have DVRs. Consequently, television sets are often tuned to different channels in different rooms and any given channel has a far smaller and often much more homogenous audience than in the past. Industry types call this phenomenon audience fragmentation and it means that the days of a family gathering together on the couch watching the same show are dying out for good; indeed, while 75 percent of U.S. households have a TV in their living room, this amounts to only a little over a quarter of the average family’s total TV sets. This fragmentation is furthered by the growth in Internet and mobile technology access and use: for example, 85 percent of American adults now use the Internet; 70 percent have access to a home
broadband connection; 61 percent have home WiFi; 91 percent own a cell phone (56 percent a smartphone); and 34 percent own a tablet computer.2

These and numerous other technological changes have made it easier to time shift, skip through commercials, or avoid broadcast media entirely. This exponentially increases the number and type of gates through which mediated information flows, and in the process profoundly changes the way citizens choose their media diet. The result of these developments has been greater variation than at any point in history in the quantity, form, content, and sources of the mediated information consumed by individual Americans. At the same time, these changes have blurred the distinction between “political” and “non-political” media and genres, eroded the gate-keeping and agenda-setting roles of the news media, muddied the line between producers and consumers of media, and challenged the professional bases of modern journalism.

Nowhere are these changes more evident than when it comes to the increasingly fragmented and segmented audiences for political information. So, by 2012 the audience for network news had shrunk to about 40 percent of the over 50 million viewers per night in the early 1980s (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2011, 2013), despite the fact that the U.S. population increased over this period by nearly 90 million. Even more telling, while the average American is 35 years old, the average age of those watching network news is now over 60 (those who get their news from the online sites of the network news divisions are between 10 and 15 years younger).

While those who grew up in the “Golden Age of Broadcast News” tend to still seek their political information from the gatekeepers established during that media regime, younger people seek out information differently. Consider a study conducted by the Pew Research Center (2012) during the 2012 presidential campaign. Among its many findings were that 34 percent of 18 to 29 year olds watched any news “yesterday,” compared to 65 percent of 50 to 64 year olds and 73 percent of those over 64; that 33 percent of 18 to 29 year olds encountered news on a social networking sight “yesterday,” compared to 10 percent of those 50 to 64 and 2 percent of those over 64, and that 60 percent of 18 to 29 year olds got there news “yesterday” from one or more digital platforms compared to 43 percent of 50 to 64 year olds and 28 percent of those over 64.

In addition to turning to different platforms for news, young people are also turning to different genres. For example, according to the Pew study cited above, while 18 to 29 year olds made up 43 percent of The Colbert Report viewers and 39 percent of The Daily Show viewers, they were only 12 percent of daily newspaper readers and 9 percent of network evening news viewers. And an earlier study the Pew Research Center (2004b) reported that 21 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds named The Daily Show and Saturday Night Live as their regular source of campaign news, compared to 23 percent of this age group that named one of the three nightly network news broadcasts.

These changes have been regularly noted by many scholars and journalists. However, they have been viewed from the perspective of the very media regime that is being challenged. As a result, the breakdown of distinctions such as that between news and entertainment, the emergence of a hybrid form labeled infotainment, the growing influence of digital media, the declining influence of professional journalists, and so forth, are seen as a crisis of democracy itself. Viewed from a broader historical vantage, however, it is the “Golden Age of Broadcast News” that is exceptional in its attempts to limit politically-relevant media to a single genre (“news”) and a single authority (“professional journalists”). Indeed, despite the seeming naturalness of the distinction between news and entertainment, it is remarkably difficult to identify the characteristics upon which this distinction is based. In fact, it is difficult—we would argue impossible—to articulate a theoretically useful definition of this distinction (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011).

We want to avoid such irresolvable and ultimately pointless definitional disputes about appropriate and inappropriate sources of political information. Instead we begin with the assumption
that a central criterion for judging any media regime in a democratic society is how well it fosters a more informed citizenry. By this standard, the lamented “Golden Age of Broadcast Journalism” did a remarkably poor job. As many scholars have noted, despite dramatic increases in the average level of education and an increase in access to sources of information, Americans in the 1980s showed no improvement in levels of political knowledge as compared to the earliest days of survey research in the 1940s (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Entman, 1989). As well, the era of the Golden Age witnessed precipitous declines in virtually all forms of political participation. We are not arguing that the Golden Age, and the rise of its dominant medium television, caused these trends, only that this media regime clearly did nothing to improve matters.

Given the limitations of the Golden Age, what does it mean that young people (and to a lesser degree others) regularly get their political information from non-traditional sources, including those labeled as “entertainment” rather than “news”? Consider the 2012 Pew Research Center study cited above, which asked four questions about current affairs. The survey then calculated the percentage of respondents who got all four questions correct according to their self-reported viewing habits. Among the more interesting results were that a greater percentage of viewers of The Daily Show and The Colbert Report (32 percent and 29 percent respectively) answered all four questions correctly than did readers of a daily newspaper (22 percent) or watchers of the network evening news (15 percent).

Does this mean that those who rely on non-traditional sources of information are better informed than those who rely on traditional news sources? The answer is more complicated than this, in ways that further challenge the news versus entertainment distinction. For example, the knowledge quiz described above also shows that consumers of some traditional news sources (e.g. The New York Times or Wall Street Journal) are as informed as watchers of The Daily Show and Colbert Report, while those consuming other non-traditional media (e.g., daytime talk radio or television) are a good deal less informed. Analysis of the earlier Pew data by Young and Tisinger (2006) further demonstrates the obsolescence of distinctions such as that between news and entertainment by showing that those who report watching “fake news” are more rather than less likely to also follow more traditional sources of political information; in short young people and to a lesser extent others are not replacing one source of information (traditional news outlets) with another (late night comedians), but rather:

… individuals use diverse forms of content to create political understanding, regardless whether that content is on the NBC Nightly News or a late-night comedy program. And while some news producers may be uncomfortable with the notion that shows like The Daily Show might play an important role, perhaps their growing relevance speaks to a larger trend in the information environment (Young & Tisinger, 2006, p. 130).

Moreover, the simplistic distinction between news and entertainment obscures the significant differences between shows lumped within one or another of these categories. So, for example, much of what appears on network news broadcasts, or in a newspaper is concerned with celebrity lifestyles (or styles of death in the case of Anna Nichole Smith), fashion, television and movie reviews, and other topics usually denigrated as entertainment or infotainment. Conversely, as Young and Tisinger point out, the humor on The Daily Show depends upon irony and satire, assuming a basic knowledge of the events being satirized. In contrast, Letterman and Leno’s jokes tend to be structured around incongruity and do not depend upon detailed knowledge of the specific issues upon which the joke is based.

To us, these findings suggest that the panic over young people turning to new or non-traditional sources of political information is at least as much about the challenges to institutionalized elite control over political information as it is about the quality and democratic implications of the way some citizens learn, or fail to learn, about politics. What is needed are ways of understanding
the changes in the information environment which are not dependent upon outmoded or ill-defined distinctions between sources of information, but rather which allow us to fully grasp the democratic potentials and pitfalls of a changing media environment.

This is not to say that many elements of the collapsed golden age are not worthy of salvaging. It is not saying that past regimes, when the lines between genres were less clear, did not suffer from their own shortcomings. And it is not saying that the new media environment is simply a return to the past.

It is to say, however, that like it or not, the answers about media and democracy provided by the Golden Age are suspect and that the new media environment opens up both new democratic possibilities as well as new threats. At the very least, changes in the media environment challenge what we think we know about political communications to the extent that our knowledge assumes the existence of a media regime that no longer exists. Moreover, if we want to foreground media’s role in fostering an informed citizenry, it is vital to focus on how ordinary citizens understand the emerging media regime. As with scholars, ordinary citizens operate on a set of assumptions conditioned by past experience with media and have given much less careful thought to the features of the new media environment and the new regime it will both shape and be shaped by.

In research bearing on this question, Press et al., (2005) had 35 individuals from all walks of life keep media diaries during the three months around the 2004 election. Supplemented by face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions, the project results provide insight into how subjects thought about or discussed public issues, and the use of media (old and new) in these deliberations. Mirroring the arguments of Young and Tisinger (2006), Press et al. found that their subjects moved seamlessly between different sources of political information, making few distinctions between old and new media or between traditional and non-traditional sources. Even more importantly, most subjects had absorbed the assumptions about political information in the Golden Age—they were quick to criticize what they saw as biased political coverage by journalists and expressed a desire for neutral sources of information. Overall, subjects were quite critical about the potential shortcomings of political information received from the gatekeepers defined by the Golden Age. However, when it came to the myriad sources of information available through new media and through non-traditional outlets, subjects were much less critical and tended to adopt an uncritical enthusiasm for its possibilities.

In short, these findings, and others like them, indicate a need for understanding the new media environment on its own terms and focusing on its implications for fostering an informed and engaged citizenry. Such understanding is vital if the media regime that will emerge over the next decades is to take full advantage of the potentials in the new media environment for enhancing democratic life. In the balance of this chapter, we try to suggest some ways to more productively understand the new media environment in ways that will allow its democratic potentials to be maximized as a new media regime develops. First, what is needed are definitions of politically-relevant mediated information that are not rooted in a now moribund Golden Age, but rather more suited to the new media environment. It is also important to develop normative criteria that can be used in public debate about the changes that are taking place.

Politically-relevant mediated information is a concept that is always essentially contestable, in need of continuous definition and explicit discussion and debate. The new media environment both limits the ability of professional journalists to limit and control the number of gates through which political information flows and so places more responsibility with ordinary citizens who now must sort through an often seemingly bewildering number of sources and types of political information. The interactivity of the Internet and the ease with which almost anyone with a hand-held video camera or audio recorder can make information available to large numbers of people
blurs the very line between producers and consumers of mediated political information. As policies and practices of a new media regime emerge, careful scholarly analysis and public deliberation emphasizing democratic values is necessary, if we are to avoid a regime aimed solely at maximizing the new media environment’s potential for furthering corporate interests, rather than democratic potentials. As in the past, journalists, political elites, and scholars have a role to play in this public debate, but so too do movie producers, television writers, musicians—and most importantly, ordinary citizens themselves. In short, we think that the new media environment creates new responsibilities for all who hold and view the tremendously expanded media soap box.

DEFINING AND EVALUATING POLITICALLY-RELEVANT MEDIA

To begin it is important to shift from categorizing politically-relevant media by genre (for example news versus drama), content (for example, fact versus fiction) or source (for example, journalist versus actor) to categorizing by utility. That is, the extent to which any communication is politically relevant is dependent on what it does—its potential use—rather than what it says, who says it, and how it is said.

We argue that, in a democratic polity, politically-relevant communications are those that shape opportunities for understanding, deliberating about, and acting on the relationships among: (1) the conditions of one’s day-to-day life; (2) the day-to-day life of fellow members of the community; and (3) the norms and structures of power that shape these relationships. It is the connection among these three elements that constitutes for us the inevitably contested, but nonetheless central definition of political relevance.

What purchase does such a definition bring us? First, it moves us away from a priori categorizations based solely on genre, focusing instead on the full range of mediated messages with which citizens interact. A comedian’s Leno monologue that satirically points out the political ignorance of the general public, a scene from the HBO series The Wire exploring racial injustice in our legal system, or debate on a blog over torture scenes in the movie Zero Dark Thirty are all as politically-relevant as a newspaper or the nightly news.

Second, and more importantly, our definition shifts the fundamental question from if a particular mediated message is politically relevant to how it is relevant. For example, the insider coverage of campaign strategy and horse race frames that make up much of news coverage of elections may be politically relevant, but this relevance often comes from a tendency to limit rather than enhance opportunities for understanding, deliberating about, and acting on the relationship among the conditions of day-to-life and the norms and structures of power that shape these relationships (Patterson, 1993). If we suggest that much of the content of news broadcasts and political talk shows is politically debilitating, it is more difficult to blame the public for not paying attention to the issues raised on such shows. It certainly casts doubt on using awareness of such coverage as a hallmark of good citizenship and civic engagement.

The new media environment does more than simply make it difficult for citizens and scholars to determine what is or is not political communication. It also has challenged the criteria by which one assesses the media’s impact on democratic politics. Historically, much of the debate and changing consensus over the appropriate role of the media in American democracy has been based on assumptions about who should (or is able to) participate in politics and so who is in need of the information to do so effectively.

The concept of “community” in our definition of political relevance is meant to signal the importance of this question. One of the greatest powers of the mass media is to help define the community to which individuals think of themselves as belonging. This is a central act in
democratic politics which underlies notions of moral responsibility. As citizens are left more and more to themselves to sift through the myriad gates through which politically relevant information flows to them, the possibilities for redefining the political community expand.

Defining the communities to which we see ourselves belonging is central to the normative implications of politically-relevant media. As John Dewey observed,

To learn to be human is to develop through the give and take of communication an effective sense of being an individually distinctive member of a community; one who understands and appreciates its beliefs, desires and methods, and who contributes to a further conversion of organic powers into human resources and values.

(1927, p. 154, emphasis added)

Philosopher Onora O’Neill (1996) argues that in defining moral responsibilities, we need to carefully and consistently define the individuals who are members of our own moral community. So, for example, if we consume inexpensive food and clothing whose price is dependent upon low paid foreign labor, it is morally inconsistent to then say that we have no responsibility to such laborers simply because they live in far-away lands about which we know little and care less. Whether we like it or not they have become members of our moral community because our own day-to-day life is dependent upon the conditions of their day-to-day life (and vice versa). The modern media are central to constructing, revealing, and at times disguising the communities to which we belong.

It’s easy to dismiss emerging virtual communities, moral communities, or communities of interest as less real or meaningful than more traditional, place-based ones. It is also easy to argue that such connections can and have been made prior to the emergence of new media. Certainly both these points have merit, but it is important not to overstate them.

Consider, for example, the sense of moral outrage and collective self-reflection that accompanied the failure of local residents to come to Kitty Genovese’s aid as she was attacked on a Queens, New York street in 1964. Ms. Genovese’s neighbors were blamed because they saw (or heard) her plight and failed to act in a situation where action was possible (at least by calling the police). In addition, national broadcast news and newspaper coverage of the incident sparked citizens around the country to reflect on the loss of community. This broader reflection did not, however, carry with it any deep-seated sense of obligation to act for viewers or readers—Ms. Genovese was not their neighbor. In the current environment it is increasingly the case that media audiences are more like Ms. Genovese’s neighbors than like the viewers and readers of her story.

We increasingly find ourselves in mediated situations where we come know other people (at least as well as Ms. Genovese’s neighbors knew her), where we see these people in need of help, where we have a real economic, cultural, or political connection to them, and where it is possible for us to do something. This creates new and heretofore unimaginable communities of moral obligation—obligations which cannot be defined mechanistically, but rather are essentially contestable and in need of constant public discussion and clarification. This is even more true when we consider the specific interactive capabilities of the Internet. During the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, for example, bloggers, like the “Baghdad Blogger,” were able to communicate their experiences of being under bombardment to millions of Internet users around the world (Kinder & Pax, 2003). This brought “enemy” civilians into our own community of moral obligation in ways almost impossible in past conflicts. In April, 2013, extensive coverage of the collapse of a garment factory in Bangladesh that killed over 400 workers brought the plight of those who manufacture clothing into the moral community of the retailers who sell these
products and the consumers who buy them. Activists used a wide variety of media, especially blogs and other social media, to publicize the names of the retailers who relied on unscrupulous subcontractors in poor countries like Bangladesh. The resulting campaign, aided enormously by social media, led many retailers to sign onto binding agreements holding them accountable for the working conditions of their foreign laborers and adverse publicity for the retailers who refused to endorse the agreement (Strochlic, 2013). These are not unproblematic developments, of course, which raise questions about the ability of the public to critically analyze such information, the implications for those who have access to new media versus those who do not (victims of genocide in Darfur, for instance), who has greater access to our resulting community of moral inclusion and so forth. Our point is that such potentials are new to the media system we now live in and need to be openly debated and discussed as we cast policies that will institutionalize a new media regime.

We are not arguing that the new media environment will inevitably lead to either improved or degraded notions of community—this will ultimately depend on how new media is used. Rather it is to suggest that in this new environment we must be aware of the political relevance of a much more varied set of communication genres and technologies. This new environment changes—for better or worse—current notions of community and the moral and political obligations associated with them.

With this in mind, we suggest four qualities of politically-relevant media that are likely to influence the practice of democratic politics. We believe that these qualities—what we label transparency, pluralism, verisimilitude, and practice—salvage the spirit and intent of past efforts to create a democratic media environment, while taking into consideration both the limitations of these earlier efforts and the new promise and pitfalls of the new media environment. We offer these criteria not because they are the only ones possible, but rather to open up discursive space for an explicit consideration of the relationship between a new media environment and democratic politics in the twenty-first century.

Transparency

By this term we mean that the audience of any mediated message must know who is speaking to them. It is related to the traditional journalistic norms of revealing one’s sources, including a byline, and acknowledging when a story involves the economic interests of the media organization. But transparency is more encompassing. It is as important to know the sources, biases, intentions, and so forth of Jon Stewart as Brian Williams; to know the economic interests of a movie studio as a newspaper chain; and to know the “sources” of a screenwriter as a reporter.

Pluralism

Pluralism is the openness of the media environment to diverse points of view and the ease of access to these views. It is related to the traditional notions of balance and equal time, but again we see pluralism as a much broader concept. New technology and the blurring of outdated distinctions in genres increases the possibility for either a much richer conversation that includes a more diverse set of viewpoints or a more homogeneous one that implicitly limits debate. The increasing ability to target audiences coupled with the ability of audiences to pick and choose the information they attend to makes it quite possible that public discourse will become more fragmented even as it becomes more controlled by a small number of media corporations.
Verisimilitude

We use the word “verisimilitude” not in its meaning as “the appearance or illusion of truth” (though this definition should always be kept in mind), but rather “the likelihood or probability of truth.” It acknowledges the uncertainty of things, while also recognizing the importance of seeking common understanding through efforts to approach the truth.

When we talk about verisimilitude in the media, we mean the assumption that sources of political communications take responsibility for the truth claims they explicitly and implicitly make, even if these claims are not strictly verifiable in any formal sense. This is as applicable to a newspaper or network news broadcast as it is to documentaries like *Fahrenheit 9/11* and *An Inconvenient Truth*, more traditional Hollywood movies like *The Hurt Locker* and *Twelve Years a Slave*, or to television series like *24* and *CSI: Miami*.

Practice

Finally, we suggest the concept of *practice*. We mean this in two senses: first, as in modeling, rehearsing, preparing, and learning for civic engagement; and second as actual engagement and participation, be it in further deliberation or more direct forms of political activity.

The Internet provides the most obvious example of how one might assess the democratic utility of the media by considering its potential for encouraging and facilitating democratic practice. As it is it provides numerous opportunities for citizens to both learn and act: from deliberating about issues of the day, to contacting public officials, to contributing money to political causes, to finding opportunities to volunteer in one’s local community, to participating in national and even global movements. But there is no guarantee that this evolving medium will continue to develop its political potential—compared to the creativity and resources that have gone into making the Internet a good and safe place to shop, efforts to make it a good and safe place to both prepare for and actually engage in political action seem malnourished.

CONCLUSIONS

The challenge in this new media environment is not to determine how to recreate the authoritative political information hierarchy of the past—for better or worse that battle has already been lost. Instead, the challenge is to create a media regime that provides the opportunities for a wide variety of voices, interests, and perspectives to vie for the public’s attention and action. We believe that such an environment is preferable—more democratic—to assuming *a priori* that any particular group or interest should have the power to set the agenda. But whether one agrees with this assessment or not, there is no returning to the past system in which a limited set of elites served as sole gatekeepers and agenda setters.

Ultimately the new information environment requires not just a new definition of political relevance and democratic utility, but also an expanded definition of democratic citizenship. The distinctions between political, cultural, and economic elites, between information producers and consumers, even between elites and “the masses” are becoming more fluid. Consequently, notions of press responsibility that underlie traditional models of media and politics must be expanded to other individuals and institutions that influence politically relevant media texts. Similarly, notions of civic responsibility that are applied to the general public must be expanded to also apply to traditional political, cultural, and economic elites—to any individual or organization that is given access to the media soapbox in our expanded public square.
In the end, the issues raised by the changing media environment are not unlike those underlying the debate between John Dewey and Walter Lippmann of nearly a century ago. At its core remains the issue of the limitations of the public—the public and its problems as Dewey called it. As the position of journalists as authoritative gatekeepers declines, citizens are left more on their own to sort through competing perspectives and multiple sources of political information available to them. So, the critical capacities and interests of the public—media literacy—again becomes a central problem for democratic life. Like Dewey we see this problem as one that is the responsibility of all of us, the media included, to overcome.

NOTES

1. The arguments in this chapter are largely drawn from Williams and Delli Carpini (2011).
3. The questions and the percentage of respondents answering correctly were: 79 percent were able to recall that Martha Stewart had been found guilty in her then recent trial; in an open-ended question, 71 percent volunteered that al Qaeda or Osama bin Laden were behind the September 11 attacks; 56 percent knew that the Republicans currently maintained a majority in the House of Representatives; and 55 percent were able to correctly estimate the current number of U.S. military deaths in Iraq.
4. These findings were supported by a Pew Foundation survey which found that a large majority of subjects expressed a desire for news with “no point of view,” rather than news from their own political perspective (2004a).
5. The meaning of any concept or issue varies over time and among different people. Certain concepts, however, are likely to generate a greater variety of meaning by their very nature:

When disagreement does not simply reflect different readings of evidence within a fully shared system of concepts, we can say that a conceptual dispute has arisen. When the concept involved is appraisive in that the state of affairs it describes is a valued achievement, when the practice described is internally complex in that its characterization involves references to several dimensions, and when the agreed and contested rules of application are relatively open, enabling parties to interpret even those shared rules differently as new and unforeseen situations arise, then the concept in question is an “essentially contested concept.”

(Connolly, 1983, p. 10)

REFERENCES


