

AFTER BROADCAST NEWS

Media Regimes, Democracy,
and the New Information Environment

Bruce A. Williams
Michael X. Delli Carpini

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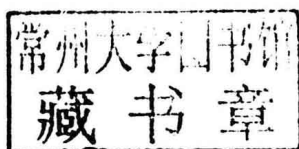
Media Regimes, Democracy, and the New Information Environment

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After Broadcast News

Media Regimes, Democracy, and the New Information Environment

The new media environment has challenged the role of professional journalists as the primary source of politically relevant information. *After Broadcast News* puts this challenge into historical context, arguing that it is the latest of several critical moments – driven by economic, political, cultural, and technological changes – in which the relationship among citizens, political elites, and the media has been contested. Out of these past moments, distinct media regimes eventually emerged, each with its own seemingly natural rules and norms, and each the result of political struggle with clear winners and losers. The media regime in place for the latter half of the twentieth century has been dismantled, but a new regime has yet to emerge. Ensuring that this regime is a democratic one requires serious consideration of what was most beneficial and most problematic about past regimes and what is potentially most beneficial and most problematic about today's new information environment.

Bruce A. Williams teaches in the Department of Media Studies at the University of Virginia. He received his Ph.D. in political science from the University of Minnesota and has taught at Pennsylvania State University, the University of Michigan, the University of Illinois, and the London School of Economics. He has published four books and more than forty scholarly journal articles and book chapters. His book *Democracy, Dialogue, and Environmental Disputes: The Contested Languages of Social Regulation* (with Albert Matheny) won the Caldwell Prize for best book in 1996 from the Science, Technology, and Environmental Politics section of the American Political Science Association. His textbook *The Play of Power: An Introduction to American Politics* (with James Eisenstein, Mark Kessler, and Jacqueline Switzer) was selected by the Women's Caucus of the American Political Science Association in 1997 as the political science text that best deals with women's issues and diversity. His most recent book is *The New Media Environment: An Introduction* (with Andrea L. Press). Also with Andrea Press, he is the editor of the *Communication Review*. Over the past five years, he has been active in a number of initiatives in the area of media policy and ethics.

Michael X. Delli Carpini, Dean of the Annenberg School for Communication, received his B.A. and M.A. from the University of Pennsylvania (1975) and his Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota (1980). Prior to joining the University of Pennsylvania faculty in July 2003, Delli Carpini was Director of the Public Policy program of the Pew Charitable Trusts (1999–2003) and a member of the Political Science Department at Barnard College and the graduate faculty of Columbia University (1987–2002), serving as chair of the Barnard department from 1995 to 1999. Delli Carpini began his academic career as Assistant Professor in the Political Science Department at Rutgers University (1980–1987). His research explores the role of the citizen in American politics, with particular emphasis on the impact of the mass media on public opinion, political knowledge, and political participation. He is author of *Stability and Change in American Politics: The Coming of Age of the Generation of the 1960s*; *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters* (winner of the 2008 American Association of Public Opinion Researchers Book Award); *A New Engagement? Political Participation, Civic Life and the Changing American Citizen*; and *Talking Together: Public Deliberation and Political Participation in America*. He has also authored or edited numerous articles, essays, and edited volumes on political communications, public opinion, and political socialization. Delli Carpini was awarded the 2008 Murray Edelman Distinguished Career Award from the Political Communication Division of the American Political Science Association.

Communication, Society and Politics

Editors

W. Lance Bennett, *University of Washington*

Robert M. Entman, *The George Washington University*

Politics and relations among individuals in societies across the world are being transformed by new technologies for targeting individuals and sophisticated methods for shaping personalized messages. The new technologies challenge boundaries of many kinds – among news, information, entertainment, and advertising; between media, with the arrival of the World Wide Web; and even between nations. *Communication, Society and Politics* probes the political and social impacts of these new communication systems in national, comparative, and global perspective.

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(Continued after the index)

*For our fathers,
Domenick Delli Carpini
and
Stanley Williams*

Acknowledgments

The longer a book takes to write, the longer the list of people and institutions that deserve thanks for helping along the way – and this project has lasted a very long time indeed. The origins of our collaboration go back several decades and are lost in the mists of time, along with the beer-soaked napkin upon which some notes and diagrams were scribbled. However, Lance Bennett and Robert Entman, colleagues and friends, have been there since this book began to take shape, and without their support and encouragement you would not be reading it now. Over the years, at too many conferences to remember, they have both been valuable sounding boards. In 1998 they invited us to a series of small workshops they had organized on the future of political communication. Hosted by the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication, it was here that we first began to develop the ideas that have shaped our thinking about the democratic implications of a dramatically changing media environment. This opportunity to try out and hone our ideas in front of a talented and engaged group of political communication scholars was an invaluable experience. Since submitting our manuscript to their series with Cambridge University Press, we have added to our indebtedness as they proved to be incredibly generous and thorough editors. Their careful reading and responses to several versions of our manuscript have, needless to say, made this book much better than it would have been otherwise.

Many other colleagues and institutions have helped both of us along the way. Barnard College, Columbia University, the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, the Institute of Communications Research at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign,

and the University of Virginia have all provided the support, colleagues, and students that have nurtured us during our work on this book. We owe a special debt to our students who have read, reacted to, and dramatically improved this book. We have also benefited from the comments and criticisms of discussants and panel participants at the many conferences where we have presented parts of this book.

In the years we have worked on this project so many colleagues have contributed that we cannot even begin to reconstruct a complete list, but we thank them all. Several individuals deserve special mention for the help they gave us in developing and sharpening our arguments: Geoff Baym, Menachem Blondheim, Pablo Boczkowski, Clifford Christians, Nick Couldry, James Curran, Elihu Katz, Tamar Liebes, Sonia Livingstone, Peter Lunt, Richard Marks, Robert McChesney, John Nerone, Andrea Press, John Zaller, and Barbie Zelizer. Two graduate students, Keren Tenenboim at Annenberg and Michael Wayne at Virginia, deserve special thanks for their help. We also thank Lew Bateman, Anne Lovering Rounds, our anonymous reviewers, and all the other folks at Cambridge University Press who have contributed so much to this book.

In 2008, a two-week residency for co-author Bruce A. Williams at the Centre for Global Media and Democracy in the Department of Media and Communications, Goldsmiths University, offered an exceptional opportunity to revise our manuscript. In January 2009, a conference on media and public opinion in times of national crisis organized by Tamar Liebes at Mishkenot Sha'ananim, Jerusalem, provided a timely opportunity for us to present and discuss the core ideas in our manuscript to an interdisciplinary and multicultural set of scholars as well as to an interested lay audience in a complicated yet inspiring environment.

It is traditional for authors to thank their families for their support and for accepting the neglect and distractions that go with working on a book. Our debt is much greater, since we have worked on this book for so long that it was less a specific project than a way of life. Andrea Press, Jane Whitaker, Jessie Press-Williams, and Joshua Press-Williams all get our special thanks for living with this project for as long as we have.

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Is There a Difference Between Tina Fey and Katie Couric? Policing the Boundaries Between News and Entertainment

The range of fiction extends all the way from complete hallucinations to the scientist's perfectly self-conscious use of a schematic model, or his decision that for his particular problem accuracy beyond a certain number of decimal places is not important. A work of fiction may have almost any degree of Fidelity, and so long as the degree of Fidelity can be taken into account, fiction is not misleading. In fact, human culture is very largely the selection, the rearrangement, the tracing of patterns upon, and the stylizing of, what William James called "the random irradiations and re-settlements of our ideas." The alternative to the use of fictions is direct exposure to the ebb and flow of sensation. That is not a real alternative . . .

– Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 1922

A federal judge yesterday sharply questioned an assertion by the Obama administration that former Vice President Richard B. Cheney's statements to a special prosecutor about the Valerie Plame case must be kept secret, partly so they do not become fodder for Cheney's political enemies or late-night commentary on "The Daily Show."

– R. Jeffrey Smith, *Washington Post*, June 19, 2009

The Strange Media Odyssey of Sarah Palin

On August 29, 2008, Republican presidential candidate John McCain announced that the little-known, first-term governor of Alaska, Sarah Palin, would be his running mate. The photogenic, former beauty queen's acceptance speech at the convention, her formal introduction to the nation, drew 37.2 million television viewers, only around 1 million less than for the acceptance speeches by Barack Obama and John McCain and

far more than any other speech at either convention (Hechtkopf 2008). Given the degree to which Palin's selection was a surprise and her lack of a record in national politics, there was great uncertainty in the media over how to tell her story. Initially, the media narrative followed along the lines suggested by decades of political communication research. Following their profession's definition of nonpartisanship and balance, journalists relied on "reliable sources" – primarily spokespersons for both parties – to define the range of opinions about Palin.

At first, this meant a generally positive treatment of the Republican vice presidential nominee. Although the narrative of Palin's rise to national prominence was cast in gendered terms, it tended to work to her advantage (in contrast with the more negative impact of gendered frames on the candidacy of Hillary Clinton). One study of the first two weeks of press coverage of the nominee found that "[she was] viewed through gendered lenses, but in ways that actually benefit[ed] her – toughness, good looks, mother[hood]" (Harp, Loke, and Bachmann 2009, 9). This generally positive coverage resulted not from any measured judgment or independent investigation by journalists, but rather from their strategy of simply reporting the two sides of the story, defined by the political parties. Barack Obama's campaign was initially reluctant to criticize the Alaskan governor, fearing it would draw attention away from their focus on McCain, create sympathy for the political newcomer, and lead to accusations of sexism (Lott 2008). Democratic reticence led to Republican advantage in shaping the narrative. Creating a kind of feedback loop, Palin's positive coverage enhanced her poll standings, which has been demonstrated to influence the ways in which journalists write about candidates: popular candidates receive favorable coverage, and those whose poll numbers are low or falling receive more negative coverage, even when it is the same candidate who first benefited from the positive coverage that comes with rising poll numbers (Patterson 1994).

Typical of this early coverage of Palin was Joe Klein's adoring cover story in the September 10, 2008, issue of *Time*:

[Her] real message is: I'm just like you want to be, a brilliantly spectacular... average American. The Palins win elections and snowmobile races in a state that represents the last, lingering hint of that most basic Huckleberry Finn fantasy – lighting out for the territories. She quoted Westbrook Pegler, the F.D.R.-era conservative columnist, in her acceptance speech: "We grow good people in our small towns..." And then added, "I grew up with those people. They're the ones who do some of the hardest work in America, who grow our food and run our factories and fight our wars. They love their country in good