DEMOCRACY WITHOUT CITIZENS

MEDIA AND THE DECAY OF AMERICAN POLITICS

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OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
New York *Oxford*

Oxford University Press

Oxford New York Toronto
Delhi Bombay Calcutta Madras Karachi
Petaling Jaya Singapore Hong Kong Tokyo
Nairobi Dar es Salaam Cape Town
Melbourne Auckland

and associated companies in
Beirut Berlin Ibadan Nicosia

200 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Entman, Robert M.
Democracy without citizens : media and the decay of American politics / Robert M. Entman.
p. cm.
Bibliography: p.
Includes index.
1. Journalism—Political aspects—United States. 2. Journalism—United States—Objectivity. 3. Government and the press—United States. 4. Political participation—United States. 5. Public opinion—United States. 6. United States—Politics and government—1988. I. Title.
PN4888.P6E58 1989
070'.973—dc 19 88-22717 CIP
ISBN 0-19-505313-3
ISBN 0-19-506576-X (pbk.)

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1
Printed in the United States of America

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For Francie and Max

Preface and Acknowledgments

This book aims to offer both an empirically-anchored theory of news and democracy and a normative exploration of the desirable and possible. This approach reflects my orientation as a political scientist trained in the field of public policy analysis. The central purpose of this new discipline is to understand and make recommendations on how to improve government. The book thus blends empirical with normative analysis, in the conviction that explicitly weaving the "is" and "ought" offers the best way to illuminate the actual and potential impacts of journalism on American democracy. In my view, normative concerns should direct the gaze of empirical analysis, and an empirical theory of the press must undergird normative critiques.

The combined approach clarifies a central conundrum: traditional free press ideals and most critiques of the media assume that journalists control the creation of the news. But, in empirical fact, journalists do not enjoy the independent command over the news process that they would need to fulfill the normative ideals. As the book explains, however much they try, journalists do not have the power to improve journalism in the ways critics demand—and they themselves would like.

This diagnosis illustrates the policy-analytical orientation at work, employing social scientific research and insight not just to build theory but to enhance our understanding of the paths and obstacles to improving the governmental process. I can understand why some people prefer a strict separation, with quantita-

tive empirical research unadulterated by value judgments or recommendations for improvement. Yet a division of labor seems reasonable. Especially in studying the media, scholars ought to have the leeway to use varied techniques. It would be ironic indeed if students of a "free press" all had to conform to one scholarly method, one research paradigm.

In fact, the dominant role expectations for journalists and social scientists present similar dilemmas. On the one hand, journalists and social scientists are supposed to follow objectivity rules and mirror reality without judging or affecting it. Yet on the other, they are supposed to explore reality dauntlessly and independently so as to illuminate the truth in all its complexity. For scholars, at least, the tension between these two demands can be resolved by making the values and goals supporting the analyses explicit and clear, and that is what I do here.

A further consequence of my analytical strategy is a commitment to going beyond quantitative data where necessary. I believe that the influence of the media is so complicated and subtle that quantitative data cannot reveal all its facets. If limited solely to quantifiable information, I believe, social science can miss some of the reality of American journalism. In studying the news media, genuine empirical accuracy demands going beyond the numbers to qualitative data and informed speculation.

Thus I write in the spirit of Donald McCloskey's advice to social scientists. McCloskey, himself a distinguished economist, argues (in *The Rhetoric of Economics*) that social scientists should not be bound by an inaccurate ideal of "hard" science to exploring an artificially limited range of phenomena using a narrow range of quantitative techniques. Rather, quoting Wayne Booth, he says they should perform a " 'careful weighing of more-or-less good reasons to arrive at more-or-less probable or plausible conclusions—none too secure but better than what would be arrived at by chance or unthinking impulse.' " The task, he says (again from Booth) is to practice " 'the art of discovering good reasons, finding what really warrants assent, because any reasonable person ought to be persuaded.' "

I have attempted to make this book accessible to journalists, politicians, and others who might be in a position to apply its insights in making practical decisions. The book is therefore de-

signed to help build social science theory while remaining approachable by those outside the scholarly community. The major adjustment for the non-specialist is the presentation of statistical analyses in appendices. Scholars should read these segments, which help to support the arguments in social scientific terms. While each appendix explains the meaning of the statistics in ways that should be comprehensible to the layperson, those uncomfortable with regression coefficients and t-tests can skip the appendices without losing the major points. To avoid cluttering the text, I also placed many of the scholarly qualifications and amplifications in discursive endnotes. Again those with scholarly interests should attend carefully, but the general reader can consult the endnotes only when he or she desires elaboration of a particular point.

Following custom and necessity, I relied heavily on family, friends, and colleagues in writing this book. Above all, my wife Francie and son Max made this book possible. As I wrote, every so often I would glance away from the computer screen, gaze at my pictures of these two, and gain the strength to write on. I finished the first outline of the book just before Max was born and sent off the manuscript right around his second birthday. He filled the time between with the most profound pleasure and pride. And in ways we can only partially comprehend, he has deepened the love of his parents for each other.

Among my colleagues and friends I cite first, for invaluable support far exceeding the call of collegial duty, those who served as my departmental chairmen: Joel Fleishman, Bob Behn, and Phil Cook. Each provided encouragement at crucial junctures. For reading the prospectus of the book and making helpful suggestions, I thank David Barber, Jay Blumler, Ben Compaine, Max McCombs, and Russ Neuman. I also appreciate the willingness of several colleagues to read and converse about selections from early versions of the manuscript: Phil Cook, Rod Hart, John McConahay, Michael Rice, Sudhir Shetty, and Leon Sigal. Seminar audiences at the universities of Iowa, Southern California, and Texas, and at Columbia University's Gannett Center, offered stimulating responses to my ideas. Five people read and commented carefully on the whole manuscript, signifi-

cantly improved the book, and earned my gratitude: Clay Steinman and John Nelson, professors respectively at Florida Atlantic University and the University of Iowa; Sheri Gravett, Ph.D. candidate at Duke University; and Rachel Toor and Stephanie Sakson-Ford, editors at Oxford University Press.

The research reported here enjoyed funding from three sources whose support I gratefully acknowledge. Most important was the John and Mary R. Markle Foundation, which bestowed two separate grants. I especially thank the foundation's president, Lloyd Morrisett, who showed faith in me when it mattered most. Also helpful were grants from the University of Wisconsin Institute for Research on Poverty and the Duke University Research Council.

I received research assistance from a talented succession of students at Duke, especially: Kelly Barfield, Kate Berry, Jeri Cabot, Will Davis, Gerri Fried, Sheri Gravett, Julie Rosenberg, and Carrie Teegardin.

Although I could not have written the book without this support and assistance, I must accept full responsibility for the analysis and conclusions that appear here.

Durham, N.C. R.M.E.
October 1988

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DEMOCRACY WITHOUT CITIZENS

Introduction

In theory, democracy in the United States benefits from a vigorous marketplace of ideas created by an energetic "free press." The press is supposed to enhance democracy both by stimulating the citizenry's political interest and by providing the specific information they need to hold government accountable. But America's "free press" cannot be free. Restricted by the limited tastes of the audience and reliant upon political elites for most information, journalists participate in an interdependent news system, not a free market of ideas. In practice, then, the news media fall far short of the ideal vision of a free press as civic educator and guardian of democracy.

Despite their institutional shortcomings, the news media do influence politics significantly. This book weaves an explanation of the media's simultaneous dependence and strength into a theory of news, public opinion, and democracy in the United States. The theory explains how the media can wield the power to alter public policy and cripple presidencies—yet cannot harness that power to serve democratic citizenship and promote government accountability as free press ideals demand.

Four paradoxes in the press's performance challenge any faith that competition in a free market of ideas nourishes democracy. The first emerges from the burgeoning, over the past twenty years or so, of a large variety of new video and print media outlets.[1] The media—both the print and electronic press[2]—are as free as ever; more competitors jam the "idea marketplace" than ever.

Moreover, computer and communication technology have enhanced the ability of journalists to obtain and transmit information rapidly and accurately. If free press ideals were valid, logic would lead us to expect the public to be participating in politics more intelligently than ever.

Yet scholarly research clearly establishes that, despite any improvement in access to news, Americans do not know more about politics now than they did twenty years ago. They vote less. According to some observers, the public's knowledge of facts or reality has actually deteriorated, so that more people are prone to political fantasy and myth transmitted by the very same news media.[3] Of course the press by itself is not responsible for the way people think and act in politics. Still, the state of citizenship in the United States raises serious questions about free press ideals.

The second paradox concerns the puzzling inability of a powerful press to hold government to account. Consider the record. Every president of the United States since 1964 has ended his term seriously weakened, drained of authority, or defeated.[4] If the flourishing and aggressive free press had been doing the job the ideals demand, if the media had highlighted the right information from the start, the foreign entanglements and scandals that crippled each administration might have ended before they escalated. I do not mean to suggest that these were the only causes of presidential failure. For Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, and Ronald Reagan, I believe they were the most important single forces behind the loss of leadership. For Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford, economic problems were probably more important; but their scandals and crises surely made Americans less patient with economic travail than they might have been.

The press did report energetically and often critically about many of these presidents' actions. Yet, paradoxically, despite their frequently bellicose and suspicious stance toward authority figures, the media failed to make the government's decisions visible and leaders accountable at the very times spirited inquiry was most desperately needed.[5] News coverage challenging these presidents' most disastrous decisions was too little, too obscure, too late.

Conventional wisdom holds the reverse. From Johnson's Viet-

nam through Nixon (and Ford's) Watergate,[6] Carter's Iran hostage tragedy, and Reagan's Iran-contra affair, the common view is that each of the debacles showed the media at their indomitable best, their most assertive and independent. But the point of a free press is to prevent rulers from damaging the nation and destroying themselves, not to let them plunge the country into disaster now and make them pay with their political fortunes later. The press certainly provided restrospective accountability in each of these cases, which was far better than nothing, but far inferior to what free press ideals presume.

In each case, most of the media failed to investigate nascent signs that something was rotten in Washington. Each time, journalists depended far too much on the president's line, whether it be framing Vietnam as a limited war, Watergate a third-rate burglary, the Iran hostage-taking a world-historical crisis, or Oliver North a minor functionary.

While this portrait of the impact of journalism defies orthodoxy, it is the one academic research best supports. Myths about the "living-room war" notwithstanding, the press did not emphasize the critical perspective on the Vietnam War. Daniel Hallin's definitive probe reveals that, especially before the Tet offensive of 1968, the media failed even to give equal weight to those who challenged the president's factual claims and policy agenda.[7] Around the Tet period itself, the negative and even despairing[8] media coverage helped topple Lyndon Johnson, the creator of the policy.[9] But American involvement continued for several more years, in some respects at an intensified level (e.g., the bombing), while, as Hallin shows, the bulk of the press failed to offer repeated, detailed, critical assessments of Richard Nixon's policies.

Watergate would become an enormous story after Nixon's re-election, but during 1972, when the crimes were actually committed and when understanding them could have altered election-year politics, most media presented only sporadic reports. Although media treatment was not the only reason, Watergate never became a major issue in the election and only a very small minority of the public—in one survey during late August 1972 a mere 1 percent—apparently thought Nixon himself involved in the scandal.[10] Kurt and Gladys Lang conclude that, during

1972, "With a few notable exceptions, the rest of the [print] press did not join the [*Washington*] *Post* in its dogged pursuit of the Watergate story."[11] The same was true of television. Detailed content analyses for 1972 are not available, but existing data show, for example, that for the seven-week period preceding the election, the three evening news shows devoted a total of about 155 minutes to Watergate-related stories. The average newscast offered only about ninety seconds on the issue.[12] By comparison, the networks spent 394 minutes on the much narrower scandal surrounding President Carter's brother Billy over a seven-week period in 1980.[13]

Turning to the Iran hostage episode, Carter apparently pumped the incident up to stimulate public support. If the media had not cooperated in elevating the situation, the hostages might have become old news. Jimmy Carter might not have lived to regret his promotion of this incident to the center of American politics for a year,[14] where it finally became a symbol of his weakness. The media treatment was not inevitable, was not compelled by the "reality." After all, when North Korea kept 82 American hostages from the Navy ship Pueblo for most of 1968, the story generated only one-fifth as much network coverage as the Iran hostages obtained.[15] Unlike the Vietnam, Watergate and Iran-contra cases, here the media's problem was less omission and neglect than over-attention; but in all cases, journalists found themselves surrendering to the president's manipulation of the news agenda. Had the press made more independent news judgments, the nation's attention in the critical election year of 1980 might have been focused on less emotional issues of more lasting significance.

Finally, until the Iran-contra scandal broke open in November 1986, the Reagan administration simply denied all allegations about Oliver North's activities in support of the Nicaraguan contra rebels during the congressional ban on such aid, as it did reports of U.S. dealings with Iran. Members of Congress accepted the denials, and so did the media.[16] Thus even though a handful of enterprising reporters occasionally wrote about these matters before late 1986, the press in general did not pick up the leads and as a practical matter the scandal did not exist until then. Arguably, had the media turned their spotlight on North and the