# SECOND EDITION

# MEDIATED POLITICAL REALITIES

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**Mediated Political Realities, second edition**

In remembrance of Dutton Peabody,
pioneer of fantasy journalism,
who taught:
"When the legend becomes fact,
print the legend."


Man is essentially a dreamer,
wakened sometimes for a
moment by some peculiarly
obtrusive element in the outer
world, but lapsing again quickly
into the happy somnolence of
imagination.

Bertrand Russell
*Sceptical Essays*

# Preface

In the Preface to the first edition of this book, published in 1983, the authors recalled the instructions urged upon political scientists by one of the founders of that discipline. Specifically, we recalled what Arthur F. Bentley had to say that is relevant to understanding the basic subject of this text, namely, the mediation of political realities through communication. Bentley wrote in the first decade of this century, a period when he spoke of a "dead political science" that had "the very breath of life left out." What was that breath? Said Bentley, "He who writes of the state, of law, or of politics without first coming to close quarters with public opinion is simply evading the very central structure of his study."

We pointed out in 1983 that since Bentley's writing of *The Process of Government* in 1908 political science had changed and that the study of public opinion was far from ignored.[1] But the analysis of public opinion did not evolve along the lines recommended by Bentley, who thought that the primary focus of political inquiry generally, and of public opinion specifically, should be what he called "language activity." More precisely, he argued that "it is what is reflected in language that demands primary attention." As a working journalist for 15 years, he had learned a lesson: There is a vital relationship between communication and politics, so vital that to study politics without making communication a key feature of the political is, indeed, to take the "breath" out of political science.

This is not to say that "language activity" has had no attention from political scientists. The highly diverse and insightful contributions of such political scientists as David V. J. Bell, Lance Bennett, William Connolly, Paul Corcoran, Murray Edelman, Doris Graber, David Paletz, Michael Shapiro, and others offer testimony to the contrary. Especially in the past decade, political scientists have

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made the relationship of politics and communication an important—although certainly not the "very central"—structure of political inquiry, to use Bentley's words.

Increasingly, political scientists have heeded Bentley's advice to examine public opinion and particularly "language activity" in politics. They have been considerably more reluctant (only slightly less so than in 1983) to attend to another of Bentley's recommendation. Writing of "the raw material of government," Bentley asked in *The Process of Government,* "Ought we not to draw a distinction in advance between it and other varieties of social activity, so that we can have our field of study defined and delimited at the outset?" He answered with a resounding "No." He said that political scientists should not be like children making paper toys, using their scissors too confidently, thus cutting themselves off from the material they need. Rather, they should "plunge into any phenomena or set of phenomena belonging to the roughly recognized field of government."

Although the "roughly recognized field of government" now includes communication for political scientists, political communication *per se* has been relatively narrowly defined to include communication in electoral campaigns, political journalism, and presidential communication, but little else. Excluded for the most part from political scientists' studies have been a key set of phenomena— namely, elements of popular culture such as entertainment programming on radio and television, popular pageantry and celebration, the popular film industry, celebrity magazines, amateur and professional sports, televangelist movements and their celebrity leaders, popular music, the use of leisure time, and the like. Popular communication in all its diverse forms, so important to the populace in a polity, has been deemed largely nonpolitical by the bulk of political scientists. The study of popular communication as a mediator of politics has instead been left to sociologists, communication scientists, and scholars in the humanities.

As recent published scholarship attests, the relationship of popular to political communication is well established. Although one does not find relevant studies in political science journals, they abound elsewhere. For example, consider *Critical Studies in Mass Communication,* a quarterly journal founded in 1984. Recent issues contain studies of the political relevance of popular music, visitors to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, TV movies such as *The Day After,* cable TV, "60 Minutes," "Star Trek," horror films, sportswriting, and many more.[2] Similarly, scholarly studies in popular culture focus increasingly on the link between "pop" culture and political culture. And book-length treatises on the mediation of politics by popular communication appear with greater frequency than they did a decade ago.

This volume is an effort to heed Bentley's advice in the study of politics generally and in the study of language activity as a mediator of politics; like the 1983 edition it remains a "plunge into any phenomena or set of phenomena belonging to the roughly recognized field of government."[3] Our argument remains that of the first edition: Few people learn about politics through direct

experience. For most persons, political realities are mediated through mass and group communication, a process that results as much in the creation, transmission, and adoption of political fantasies as it results in independently validated views of what happens. However, this edition differs from the first in two major respects. First, in 1983 there were relatively few studies providing insights into how various media portray politics to Americans, especially through popular communication. As noted, that is no longer the case. We must warn, however, that as in 1983 there are still relatively few studies of how Americans respond on the basis of media portrayals. So, although this edition can take greater advantage of published research into political mediation by diverse media than did the first, we must still turn primarily to speculation in discussing the consequences of that mediation.

Second, although each of the authors did receive a few of the by now obligatory dismissals that the first edition was "just another of his textbooks," many, many people who actually did read the work before judging—teachers, students, colleagues, friends, adversaries, and enemies—took it seriously, liked it, and provided evaluations and suggestions for revision. We are very thankful to them. We have heeded their advice when possible. Because we have done so, and because of studies published since 1983, this edition is not simply old wine in a new bottle. The basic organization of the text remains the same, as does the message of each chapter. Many of those chapters have been more than merely updated, however; they have been extensively revised and rewritten.

The Preface of the first edition acknowledged our debts to individuals who contributed to its publication. We remain indebted to them but shall not repeat their names here. They know who they are and of our gratitude. As noted, this revision depends on the evaluations and advice of numerous individuals, too numerous to acknowledge here. They too know who they are; they too know of our gratitude. We do single out David Estrin of Longman Inc. for his encouragement and enthusiasm in the publication of a revised edition. Understanding baseball as he does, he thereby understands the heart and mind of America.

We believe that people live in a shared world, an all-too-often common, single reality mediated for them. Each person reaches different personal judgments about what mediated political reality *means,* but the tendency is to accept the mediated world as *real* without question. We invite—nay, encourage—readers to take a skeptical approach. The task of the skeptic is not to question meanings only but the common reality itself from which those meanings derive, on grounds that political reality is but one of many fantasies that may or may not serve us well. We hope that a new generation of readers will find the contents useful, especially in recognizing and evaluating their own political fantasies—no matter what the source.

Dan Nimmo
James E. Combs

## NOTES

1. Arthur F. Bentley, *The Process of Government* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1967; first published in 1908 by Chicago University Press, Chicago, IL).
2. See all of the following: Karen A. Foss and Stephen W. Littlejohn, *"The Day After*: Rhetorical Visions in an Ironic Frame," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication,* 3 (September 1986): 317–336; Thomas Streeter, "The Cable Fable Revisited: Discourse, Policy, and the Making of Cable Television," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication,* 4 (June 1987): 174–200; Richard Campbell, "Securing the Middle Ground: Reporter Formulas in '60 Minutes'," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication,* 4 (December 1987): 325–350; Henry Jenkins III, " 'Star Trek' Rerun, Reread, Rewritten: Fan Writing as Textual Poaching," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication,* 5 (June 1988): 85–107; Barry Brummett, "Electric Literature as Equipment for Living: Haunted House Films," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication,* 2 (September 1985): 247–261: Nick Trujillo and Leah R. Ekdom, "Sportswriting and American Cultural Values: The 1984 Chicago Cubs," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication,* 2 (September 1985): 262–280. See also Harry W. Haines, " 'What Kind of War?': An Analysis of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication,* 3 (March 1986): 1–20.
3. Bentley, *The Process of Government,* p. 199.

# Contents

# How Real Is Politics?
## *The Mediation of Political Realities*

Miss Sherwin of Gopher Prairie never lived, yet she is immortal. Her name is unknown to most, yet her fame is enduring. Her residence is fictional, yet we all live there. She will never die because, at least in politics, each of us is Miss Sherwin of Gopher Prairie.

Writing in 1922 after the close of World War I, journalist Walter Lippmann reflected on Miss Sherwin and her understanding of that great conflict.[1] Miss Sherwin, he wrote, borrowing from the 1920 novel of Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street,* "is aware that a war is raging in France and tries to conceive it." But she has never been to France and "certainly she has never been along what is now the battle front." All she has seen are pictures of soldiers, and it is impossible for her to imagine three million of them. "No one, in fact, can imagine them, and the professionals do not try," wrote Lippmann. Instead, "they think of them as, say, two hundred divisions." Miss Sherwin thinks not of masses of soldiers but of a personal duel between the French General Joffre and the German Kaiser. Her mind's eye pictures an 18th-century painting of a great soldier, a hero: "He stands there boldly unruffled and more than life size, with a shadowy army of tiny little figures winding off into the landscape behind." Miss Sherwin is not alone in this fantasy. Indeed, great men themselves are not "oblivious to these expectations." A photographer visits the French General Joffre and finds him in a drab office at a worktable without papers where he is preparing to sign his name to a single document. Someone notes that there are no maps on the walls. Surely it is impossible to think of a general without maps! So, aides hastily put maps in place. The photograph is snapped, the maps immediately removed.

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There is a moral in this little tale about innocent Miss Sherwin of Gopher Prairie. Lippmann believed that people act on the basis of pictures they carry around in their heads, pictures of the way they think things are. These pictures derive from, and are changed by, two different sources or a combination thereof. One is direct experience. People's daily lives consist of direct, first-hand experiences of events, places, other people, objects, and so on. They eat and sleep, work and play, argue and relent, worry and relax. The pictures in their heads help them to make sense of it all, and in large measure the pictures comprise what is "real" for each of them. But a lot of things happen that people do not experience directly. They hear, read, or see pictures of these things, imagine what took place, make sense of them, and incorporate these indirectly experienced things into their pictures of the world as another bit of their "real" world.

For Miss Sherwin of Gopher Prairie, direct experience of the war in France was impossible. She could conceive of the war only on the basis of what she was told or what she expected to be told. Her reality was not a first-hand, direct involvement in the Great War but a product of secondhand, indirect accounts. It was a *mediated,* not an experienced reality. Miss Sherwin was not alone in this respect. Unable to conceive of three million soldiers, each plagued by the agonies of combat, the professional military imagined them instead as 200 depersonalized, faceless divisions. Nor could the mediated realities of Miss Sherwin or the generals differ from popular expectations. We expect generals to have battle maps; so supply them, take the photograph, remove them. Mediated realities are thereby self-fulfilling: Accounts of the way things are conform to the pictures people have of those things, the way they imagine them, and thus the accounts reinforce instead of challenging the pictures in our heads.

This book is about such mediated realities, specifically, the mediated realities of politics. Its argument is straightforward—the pictures we have of politics are rarely the products of direct involvement. Instead, they are perceptions focused, filtered, and fantasized by a host of mediators. Some are found in the mass media—the press or in entertainment programming on television, in movies, popular magazines, songs, and so on. Others consist of group efforts in election campaigns, political movements, religious causes, and government policymaking. To introduce the argument, we first pose the question "How real is politics?" by considering how real is real, how real is fantasy, and by considering the logic of mediated politics—real and fantastic.

## HOW REAL IS REAL?

There is a Japanese fable so venerable that over the course of many centuries it has been related in song, narrative, and dramatic form. It is the fable of *Rashomon.* The lesson the fable teaches goes far beyond the boundaries of Japan. Indeed, by transferring its setting to the American West, an enterpris-

ing producer made it into a moderately successful movie (*The Outrage*) featuring William Shatner, who later starred in TV and movies as Captain James T. Kirk of *Star Trek*. *Rashomon* involves a group of people who cross paths after separately witnessing a common event. Each renders an account of what he or she saw. Although each person saw precisely the same things happen, each interprets those happenings in such different ways that no two persons' accounts are the same. Each person's imagination results in a different picture in his or her head. The point of the story is that we all live in a common world, but no two people live in the same one. Each of us forges our own reality. What is real to one of us may be illusion to another, and vice versa.

How real, then, is real? Philosophers have debated that question for centuries and are probably no closer to a consensus than on that first day when one of them stubbed a toe on a rock and pondered whether the pain came from a real stone or an imaginary one. For purposes of our discussion, there is little gain in summarizing the many philosophic arguments about the nature of reality. Rather, we shall simply state a position on that question that is in keeping with our basic purpose of describing mediated political realities.

Our view derives from a line of thinking summarized in a provocative, anecdotal book by Paul Watzlawick entitled *How Real Is Real?*[2] Watzlawick's training and professional experience are in the fields of psychiatry and psychotherapy. His studies have led him to conclude that many alleged mental, emotional, and social disorders grow out of faulty communication between people, discourse that places people in different worlds and causes them constantly to talk past one another. *How Real Is Real?* argues simply that "communication creates what we call reality." At first, one may dismiss that proposition as obvious, even trivial. After all, humans must communicate with one another; it stands to reason that they will influence one another's views by doing so. Hence, is it not obvious that one's impressions of things flow from communication? Perhaps, but Watzlawick is saying something more. He is saying that insofar as things make any difference to us at all—that is, real things, or reality—communication creates them. Watzlawick admits this is a "most peculiar" view, "for surely reality is what is, and communication is merely a way of expressing or explaining it." Not at all, he urges, and then summarizes his position neatly:

> [O]ur everyday, traditional ideas of reality are delusions which we spend substantial parts of our daily lives shoring up, even at the considerable risk of trying to force facts to fit our definition of reality instead of vice versa. And the most dangerous delusion of all is that there is only one reality. What there are, in fact, are so many different versions of reality, some of which are contradictory, but all of which are the results of communication and not reflections of eternal, objective truths.[3]

There are three points here: (1) Our everyday, taken-for-granted reality is a delusion; (2) reality is created, or constructed, through communication—not

expressed by it; (3) for any situation there is no single reality, no one objective truth, but multiple, subjectively derived realities. The world is *Rashomon*.

There are some discomforting implications in all of this when one thinks about it. Granted, we are generally willing to accept limits to our understanding, that there are few things we can really know. But does that deny that there is a concrete, palpable "real world" that exists and is knowable? Watzlawick implies as much. The trouble, as he understands it, is that whether a real world exists or not, the only way we can know it, grasp it, make sense of it, is through communication. Even when we are directly involved in things, we do not apprehend them directly. Instead, media of communication intervene, media in the form of language, customs, symbols, stories, and so forth. That very intervention is a process that creates and re-creates (constructs and reconstructs) our realities of the moment and over the proverbial long haul. Communication does more than report, describe, explain: It creates. In this sense all realities—even those emerging out of direct, firsthand experience with things—are mediated. Looking back we can speculate that Miss Sherwin's reality of Gopher Prairie was no less mediated than was her conception of the war raging in France.

One other point should be emphasized: In any situation there is more than one reality, or version of reality; some versions are contradictory. We scarcely need reminding that countless millions have died extending or defending a particular version of reality in the face of other versions and seeking to impose a single objective truth on all. More peaceful political debates are also clashes of competing versions of what is real. Every four years the Republican and Democratic presidential candidates debate each other, each offering a contrasting vision of the state of the country and of the world and how it should be. Is one clearly right, correct, and honest? Is the other wrong, stupid, and evil? Avid supporters of either candidate might think so. It is more likely, however, that the pictures of the world dancing through each candidate's head are contradictory, not disconfirming.

What accounts for multiple, contradictory realities? If we accept Watzlawick's basic premise, that communication creates multiple realities (i.e., all realities are mediated), then any means of communication that intervenes in human experience is a potential mediator of reality. Our focus in this book, however, is not on all such means but only on two. One is the role that group communication plays in mediating realities (what we refer to as *group-mediated politics*); the other is the part mass communication plays (what we speak of as *mass-mediated politics*).

Whether birds of a feather flock together or opposites attract, we know not which, if either, adage is correct. We do know that it is characteristic of the human species to congregate in groups of all kinds: families, neighborhoods, villages, work groups, play groups, churches, crowds, and many others. Rewarding or not, group life apparently serves needs for companionship, camaraderie, cooperation, defense, and so forth. Certainly one attribute of any

group is communication among its members. Through communication members define situations, problems, and the means of coping with difficulties. Communication simply makes living together possible. And in the process, the members create realities for the group. Differing groups (and differing groups within groups) frequently create contrasting pictures of the world. As we argue in Part II, group-mediated politics lends a special quality to political realities in this nation, particularly in defining relationships between politics and policymaking, elites, religious leaders, and alleged conspirators.

In an earlier era, groups were the center of life for people. Tightly bonded, intimate family gatherings, for instance, were important in defining the realities for several generations of Americans. Today, however, there is another reality-creating means of communication, sometimes complementing and sometimes competing with groups. That is mass communication, or what we often refer to as *mass media*. "Social reality is constituted, recognized, and celebrated with media," write the authors of an insightful work on how mass media shape American understandings of the way things are.[4] We share the view that much of what passes for social realities in contemporary America is what the mass media fashion. We examine the quality of mass-mediated politics in Part I.

Before discussing the specific sources of mediated political realities, we need to consider a problem thus far brushed aside in asking "How real is real?" To say that communication creates realities, that there are different versions of what is real in a given situation, that commonsense notions of eternal, objective truths are deluding, implies that reality is an iffy matter. Few of us, however, care to live our lives in a continuous state of doubt. Indeed, we would be regarded as strange if we went around constantly asking: "What did you really mean by that?" "Did I really see what I think I saw?" "Do you see what I see?" In our everyday lives we simply take certain things for granted. If not reality, then what?

## WELCOME TO FANTASYLAND: IT'S NOT ALL MICKEY MOUSE!

Humans are not passive creatures. Things that reach them in their everyday lives—whether through direct, firsthand experience or indirectly by way of groups and mass media—have no inherent meaning. People pay heed to some things, ignore others; the messages that they heed, they interpret and act on. Some things impress people, others they forget, others they avoid. People are active mediators, or interpreters, of their worlds. They are in, and constitute, a communication process that creates realities.

Human imagination is essential to that process. We employ our imaginations for every conceivable purpose. It surely helps us to frame a picture of the way the world is and all possible objects are which we deal with in our

daily lives. But imagination does more. As philosopher David Hume wrote, "Imagination extends experience."[5] Lacking imagination, the pictures in our heads would be limited, but with imagination we can conceive of things that we have never experienced. Indeed, perhaps no one has ever experienced what can sometimes be imagined.

Imagination can take many forms. Suppose one plans to take an extended vacation in a foreign land. Hardheaded planning is needed to decide what clothes to take, to arrange lodging, to prepare or buy meals, to schedule transportation, perhaps to learn a language, and to attend to a myriad of other details—not to mention financing the whole expedition. A person must anticipate the problems that can come up in such a venture. Not having made the trip before, one's experience is only a partial guide to what can happen. Imagination is indispensable in adjusting to and formulating expectations of possible happenings. But not everyone carefully plans. Some daydream, which is another form of imagining. The planning of concrete activities takes second place to drifting off into a dream world of what the trip will be like—visits to exotic places, encounters with exciting strangers, titillating experiences.

Whatever form imagination takes—planning, anticipating, forming expectations, dreaming, *déjà vu* experiences, extrasensory perception, remembering, and so on—the process is essential to the construction of our realities, the pictures of the world in our heads. In dealing with sources of mediated realities, especially the group and mass communication sources of political realities, we single out a particular type of imaginative activity, that of fantasy. As this book will show, the vast bulk of political reality that most of us take for granted (whether we are private citizens or public officials) consists of a combination of fantasies created and evoked by group and mass communication.

We are not the only ones to single out fantasy as a form of imaginative activity worthy of attention. Advertisers of commercial products hawk their wares by catering to the imagination through fantasy. Pick up any magazine. Thumb through the advertising. One ad pictures a fantasy for "people who like to smoke": Select the advertised cigarette and, by implication, enjoy witty conversation with affluent, bright, beautiful people. Would you like to go to "all corners of the earth"? An ad for an airline promises "London's jolly cheer," "Frankfurt's frosty beer," and "Cancun's water so clear." Do you fancy earning money for college? Then, "Be all you can be" and join the U.S. Army so that you too can be hugged by Mom after graduation from basic training, just like the recruit in the full-page ad.

As another case, consider the leisure industry. In 1955 Walt Disney Productions, Inc. opened its theme park, Disneyland, in California. The enterprise was so well received that another opened in 1971, Disney World, in Florida. Both parks feature "Fantasyland," areas wherein hundreds of thousands of tourists have indulged their imaginations to the full over the years. The wide appeal of Fantasyland has not gone unnoticed. One of the world's largest