

Chapter 2

News Content: Four Information Biases That Matter

It is a writer's obligation to impose narrative. Everyone does this. Every time you take a lump of material and turn it into something you are imposing a narrative. It's a writer's obligation to do this. And, by the same token, it is apparently a journalist's obligation to pretend that he never does anything of the sort. The journalist claims to believe that the narrative emerges from the lump of material, rises up and smacks you in the face like marsh gas.

Nora Ephron

Here is how *The Washington Post* described President Bush's dramatic landing on the aircraft carrier *Abraham Lincoln*—the news event that set the stage for his speech announcing that the military phase of the War in Iraq was over:

When the Viking carrying Bush made its tailhook landing on the aircraft carrier *USS Abraham Lincoln* off California yesterday, the scene brought presidential imagery to a whole new level. Bush emerged from the cockpit in a full olive flight suit and combat boots, his helmet tucked jauntily under his left arm. As he exchanged salutes with the sailors, his ejection harness, hugging him tightly between the legs, gave him the bowlegged swagger of a top gun.¹

This image was replayed time and again on television news shows. It was proclaimed as the mother of all photo-ops, a publicity event that would establish Mr. Bush as a world leader, and a supremely confident commander in chief. Many journalists anticipated that this news image would also help secure an easy victory over any imaginable Democratic candidate who might emerge to challenge Mr. Bush in the 2004 election. Consider how MSNBC's Keith Olberman introduced the live

coverage on his program *Countdown* and then discussed it with his guest Chris Matthews, the anchor of another MSNBC program *Hardball*:

OLBERMAN: Good evening. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was the first serving president to fly in an airplane, Theodore Roosevelt was the first to take the still risky ride in an automobile, and White House historians disagree about whether it was James K. Polk or John Tyler, who in the 1840s was the first to, as his contemporaries feared, risk his immortal soul by being photographed. Today George W. Bush skipped the safer route of declaring combat over from the White House to instead become the first president to make an arrested landing on an Air Force carrier. The president's speech is live here on MSNBC in 58 minutes. . . .

OLBERMANN: This was victory lap day. I mean, we're seeing the sign aboard the Lincoln right now that reads "Mission Accomplished." And we. . . .

MATTHEWS: More than that, Keith, it's a statement. It's saying to the Democratic Party or anyone else who wants to challenge this man for a full eight-year presidency, Try to do this. Look at me. Do you really think you've got a guy in your casting studio, your casting director can come up with, who can match what I did today? Imagine Joe Lieberman in this costume, or even John Kerry. Nobody looks right in the role Bush has set for the presidency—commander-in-chief, medium height, medium build, looks good in a jet pilot's costume—or uniform, rather—has a certain swagger, not too literary, certainly not too verbal, but a guy who speaks plainly and wins wars. I think that job definition is hard to match for the Dems.²

Whether the story is told by the venerable *Washington Post*, or in breathless cable talk show chatter, the terms are much the same. The emphasis is on how the news story plays as an entertainment drama. Does the flight suit look good? Does the swagger seem natural? Does Mr. Bush look right for the part? Can the opposition cast anyone more convincing for the role of president? But what about the relationship between such news images and more substantial leadership qualities or the progress of the war itself? These questions will be addressed more fully in the case study later in this chapter, which uses tools developed in the chapter to analyze George W. Bush's news image.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF BIAS

The general focus of this chapter is on a deeper but less obvious sort of news bias—one that favors *dramatic* and *personalized* aspects of events over more complex—and potentially more engaging—underlying political realities. The result of focusing on individual actors and the dramas swirling around them is to make many political situations seem fragmented and confusing. Audiences are often left hanging, waiting for daily story updates about disorder and the restoration of authority, normalcy, and control, rather than installments on news narratives that reveal the politics behind the events.

Consider some of the other choices that news organizations had in framing the aircraft carrier landing story. *Framing involves choosing a broad organizing theme for selecting, emphasizing, and linking the elements of a story. Frames are thematic*

categories that integrate and give meaning to the scene, the characters, their actions, and supporting documentation.³ For example, the carrier landing story could have been framed as a publicity stunt. The story also could have been framed around challenges to the administration link between Iraq and the War on Terror. The path of least resistance was to fill the news frame with a well-staged White House dramatic production starring the president. This near universal news framing decision left the underlying situation fragmented: obscuring the link between terrorism and Iraq and endowing a formerly weak foreign policy leader with a Hollywood swagger. The Hollywood moment also made for a nice chapter ending in the authority-disorder narrative: a promise of return to normalcy—"Mission Accomplished."

Yet the long-term news frames offered by the administration did not comfortably contain disturbing reports of U.S. battle casualties and civil chaos in Iraq. Journalists who shifted the framing of the conflict away from White House communication strategies on their own were accused of liberal bias, or being unpatriotic, as explained in the case study in Chapter 1. The Democrats failed to offer much of an opportunity to open the news gates, as they were too busy attacking each other in the presidential primaries to agree on a party position that might shift the framing to a more substantive drama involving a clash between the president and political opponents. As a result, only 34 of 414 stories told by ABC, NBC, and CBS on the buildup to and rationale for the Iraq War from September 2002 through February 2003 originated outside the White House.⁴

What were people to think? The polls reported at the opening of Chapter 1 show that most people tried to accept what they saw on the news and generally supported administration framing even months after the situation in Iraq deteriorated. One factor in this public response was a poor factual grasp of the situation. New events or political developments would eventually lead news organizations to reframe the story, but the risk of such sudden frame shifts is that people feel deceived and even less sure what to believe. This is how the biases in the U.S. communication system contribute to a public that is increasingly cynical and disillusioned with politics and government.⁵

The paradox is that journalists complain about the scripted and staged events they cover, but they seem unable to find other ways to write stories or to replace the cynical tone with perspectives that might help citizens become more engaged. As a result of these and other factors, large numbers of people actively avoid politics, while watching the media spectacle with a mixture of disbelief and disapproval. Meanwhile, more people escape from public affairs and political participation into ever more personalized media worlds that one observer has likened to the gated communities and suburban enclaves into which many people have physically migrated in society.⁶

The point here is not to place the blame for civic disengagement on the news media. Journalists complained frequently that events that are so heavily managed by professional communication consultants give them little to work with. This begs the question: Why was there so little innovative coverage that might stimulate citizen engagement with events as they are happening? This chapter takes a close look at news content. The concern is with information biases that make news hard to use as a guide to citizen action because they obscure the big picture in which daily events take place. In addition, they often convey a negative or cynical tone about politics that undermines citizen motivation for digging deeper to learn more or to become engaged.

As explained in Chapter 1, most debates about journalistic bias are concerned with the question of ideology. For example, does the news have a liberal or conservative, a Democratic or Republican, drift? To briefly review the argument from the last chapter, some variation in news content or political emphasis does occur, but it can seldom be explained as the result of journalists routinely injecting their partisan views into the news. The avoidance of political partisanship by journalists is reinforced, among other means, by the professional ethics codes of journalists, by the editors who monitor their work, and by the business values of the companies they work for.

Another important point to recall is that people who see a consistent ideological press bias are seeing it with the help of their own ideology. This generalization is supported by opinion research showing that people in the middle see the press as generally neutral, whereas those on the left complain that the news is too conservative, and those on the right think the news has a left-leaning bias.⁷ If neutrality or objectivity could be achieved, citizens with strong views on particular issues would not recognize it. Moreover, even if the news contained strong ideological biases, people with a point of view are most able to detect and to defend themselves against them. Indeed, many nations favor a partisan press system as the best way to conduct public debates and to explore issues, a matter to which we will return in later chapters.

While many Americans are caught up in dead-end debates about one kind of news bias that is less dangerous than commonly assumed, few are noticing other information bias that really are worth worrying about. A more sensible approach to news bias is to look for those universal information problems that hinder the efforts of citizens, whatever their ideology, to take part in political life. The task for the remainder of this book is to understand the U.S. public information system at a deeper level. Fortunately, most of the pieces to the news puzzle are right in front of us. For all of its defects, the news continues to be largely a public production, with government press offices, media organizations, and popular tastes all available for inspection. The openness of the system may be its saving grace when we turn to questions of reform later in the book.

FOUR INFORMATION BIASES THAT MATTER: AN OVERVIEW

Our expectations about the quality of public information are rather high. Most of us grew up with history books full of journalistic heroism exercised in the name of truth and free speech. We learned that the American Revolution was inspired by the political rhetoric of the underground press and by printers' effective opposition to the British Stamp Act. The lesson from the trial of Peter Zenger has endured through time: *the truth is not libelous*. The goal of the history book journalists was as unswerving as it was noble: to guarantee for the American people the most accurate, critical, coherent, illuminating, and independent reporting of political events. Yet Peter Zenger would probably not recognize, much less feel comfortable working in, a modern news organization.

Like it or not, the news has become a mass-produced consumer product, bearing little resemblance to history book images. Communication technologies, beginning with the wire services and progressing to satellite feeds and digital video, interact

with corporate profit motives to create generic, “lowest-common-denominator” information formats. In particular, there are four characteristics of news that stand out as reasons why public information in the United States does not always advance the cause of democracy: *personalization*, *dramatization*, *fragmentation*, and the *authority-disorder bias*.

PERSONALIZATION

If there is a single most important flaw in the American news style, it is the overwhelming tendency to downplay the big social, economic, or political picture in favor of the human trials, tragedies, and triumphs that sit at the surface of events. For example, instead of focusing on power and process, the media concentrate on the people engaged in political combat over the issues. The reasons for this are numerous, from the journalist’s fear that probing analysis will turn off audiences to the relative ease of telling the human-interest side of a story as opposed to explaining deeper causes and effects.

When people are invited to take the news personally, they can find a wide range of private, emotional meanings in it. However, the meanings inspired by personalized news may not add up to the shared critical understandings on which healthy citizen involvement thrives. The focus on personalities encourages a passive spectator attitude among the public. Whether the focus is on sympathetic heroes and victims or hateful scoundrels and culprits, the media preference for personalized human-interest news creates a “can’t-see-the-forest-for-the-trees” information bias that makes it difficult to see the big (institutional) picture that lies beyond the many actors crowding center stage who are caught in the eye of the news camera.

The tendency to personalize the news would be less worrisome if human-interest angles were used to hook audiences into more serious analysis of issues and problems. Almost all great literature and theater, from the Greek dramas to the modern day, uses strong characters to promote audience identifications and reactions in order to draw people into thinking about larger moral and social issues. American news often stops at the character development stage, however, and leaves the larger lessons and social significance, if there is any, to the imagination of the audience. As a result, the main problem with personalized news is that the focus on personal concerns is seldom linked to more in-depth analysis. What often passes for analysis are opaque news formulas such as “he/she was a reflection of us,” a line that was used in the media frenzies that followed the deaths of Britain’s Princess Diana and America’s John Kennedy, Jr. Even when large portions of the public reject personalized news formulas, as during the frenzied journalistic and prosecutorial preoccupation with President Clinton’s personal sexual behavior, the personalization never stops. This systematic tendency to personalize situations is one of the defining biases of news.

DRAMATIZATION

Compounding the information bias of personalization is a second news property in which the aspects of events that are reported tend to be the ones most easily dramatized in simple “stories.” As previously noted, American journalism has settled over-

whelmingly on the reporting form of stories or narratives, as contrasted, for example, to analytical essays, political polemics, or more scientific-style problem reports. Stories invite dramatization, particularly with sharply drawn actors at their center.

News dramas emphasize crisis over continuity, the present over the past or future, and the personalities at their center. News dramas downplay complex policy information, the workings of government institutions, and the bases of power behind the central characters. Lost in the news drama (*melodrama* is often the more appropriate term) are sustained analyses of persistent problems such as inequality, hunger, resource depletion, population pressures, environmental collapse, toxic waste, and political oppression. Serious though such human problems are, they just are not dramatic enough on a day-to-day level to make the news until they produce crises that trigger the authority-disorder narrative.

Crises are the perfect news material because they fit neatly into the dramatization bias. The “crisis cycle” portrayed in the news is classic dramatic fare, with rising action, falling action, sharply drawn characters, and of course, plot resolutions. By its very definition, a crisis is something that will reach dramatic closure through cleanup efforts or humanitarian relief operations. Unfortunately, the crisis cycles in the news only reinforce the popular impression that high levels of human difficulty are inevitable and therefore acceptable.⁸ Crises in the news are often resolved when situations return to “manageable” levels of difficulty, yet underlying problems often continue to grow. The news is certainly not the cause of these problems, but it could become part of the solution if it substituted illumination of causes for dramatic coverage of symptoms.

As in the case of personalization, dramatization would not be a problem if it were used mainly as an attention-focusing device to introduce more background and context surrounding events. Drama can help us engage with the great forces of history, science, politics, or human relations. When drama is used to bring analysis to mind, it is a good thing. When drama is employed as a cheap emotional device to focus on human conflict and travail, or farce and frailty, the larger significance of events becomes easily lost in waves of immediate emotion. The potential advantages of drama to enlighten and explain are sacrificed to the lesser tendencies of melodrama to excite, anger, and further personalize events. Thus the news often resembles real-life soap operas, only with far more important consequences.

One of the things that makes the news dramatic—indeed, that may even drive news drama—is the use of visuals: photos, graphics, and live-action video. These elements of stories not only make the distant world seem more real, they make the news more believable. In many ways, particularly for television, the pictures may help editors and reporters decide which stories to tell and how to tell them. Again, there is nothing inherently wrong with emphasizing visuals in news production. In fact one might argue that thinking visually is the best way to engage the senses in communicating about society and politics. There is often, however, a tension between not reporting important stories that are hard to picture and reporting possibly unimportant stories simply because they offer great visual images. The discussion in Chapter 3 explains the economics of editorial decisions to start with the pictures and then add the words. The selection of news stories primarily because they offer dramatic images is one of several

important reasons why the news is often so fragmented or disconnected from larger political or economic contexts that would provide other ways to tell the story.

FRAGMENTATION

The emphasis on personal and dramatic qualities of events feeds into a third information characteristic of the news: the isolation of stories from each other and from their larger contexts so that information in the news becomes fragmented and hard to assemble into a big picture. The fragmentation of information begins by emphasizing individual actors over the political contexts in which they operate. Fragmentation is then heightened by the use of dramatic formats that turn events into self-contained, isolated happenings. The fragmentation of information is further exaggerated by the severe space limits nearly all media impose for fear of boring readers and viewers with too much information.

As a result, the news comes to us in sketchy dramatic capsules that make it difficult to see the causes of problems, their historical significance, or the connections across issues. It can even be difficult to follow the development of a particular issue over time as stories rise and fall more in response to the actions and reactions of prominent public figures than to independent reporting based on investigation of events. In addition, because it is difficult to bring historical background into the news, the impression is created of a world of chaotic events and crises that appear and disappear because the news picture offers little explanation of their origins.

THE AUTHORITY-DISORDER BIAS

Whether the world is returned to a safe, normal place, or whether the very idea of a normal world is called into question, the news is preoccupied with order, along with related questions of whether authorities are capable of establishing or restoring it. It is easy to see why these generic plot elements are so central to news: They are versatile and tireless themes that can be combined endlessly within personalized, dramatized, and fragmented news episodes. When the dramatic restoration of normalcy is not a plausible frame for an event, the news may quickly challenge authority itself, perhaps by publicizing the latest scandal charge against a leader or by opening the news gates to one politician willing to attack another.

In the past, it could be argued (as earlier editions of this book did) that the news more often resolved the authority-order balance in favor of official pronouncements aimed at “normalizing” conflicted situations by creating the appearance of order and control. A classic scenario of politics, according to political scientist Murray Edelman, is for authorities to take center stage to respond to crises (sometimes after having stirred them up in the first place) with emotionally reassuring promises that they will be handled effectively.⁹ Today’s authorities still play out their parts, but the news increasingly finds ways to challenge the pronouncements of officials and the presumption of order in society. In short, the biggest change in portrayals of authority and order in the news since earlier editions of this book is that the news balance has shifted away from trusted authorities providing reassuring promises to restore chaotic situa-

tions to a state of order or normalcy. Normalizing stories continue to appear, of course, but a growing news trend is to portray unsympathetic, scheming politicians who often fail to solve problems, leaving disorder in their wake. Local news has streamlined the plot even further to report simple mayhem.

What is the evidence for the proposition that news is more negative and less likely to paint reassuring pictures of the return to normalcy following dramatic crises and scandals? Recall the research discussed in the last chapter suggesting that, for reasons having more to do with the news business than with external realities, the following changes have been charted in news content in recent years:¹⁰

- Increased levels of mayhem (crime, violence, accidents, health threats, freeway chases, and other images of social chaos)
- Greater volume of criticism of government, politicians, and their policies, and less focus on the substance of policies
- Higher journalistic tone of cynicism and negativity

In an industry competing for fickle and shrinking audiences, images of disorder can be amplified through subtle emphases in news writing. For example, is the traditional American family *threatened* by the increase in single-parent and two-working-parent households, or is the family in America simply *changing* in these ways as part of the normal course of social change?

As news organizations take greater dramatic license with news plots, the elements of authority and disorder are often mixed to achieve the greatest dramatic effect. A typical example comes from a local newscast in Orlando, Florida, where Channel 6 announced an “exclusive” and promised a report from their “live truck” at the scene. The newscast opened with the anchor describing “A shocking scene in a Lake Mary neighborhood tonight. A home surrounded by crime-scene tape. A death police are calling ‘suspicious.’” As the anchor spoke, the screen flashed the words “Neighborhood Shocker.” Cut to the reporter live from the scene who further dramatized the death of a 66-year-old woman by saying that police did not know what happened. As if to document this claim, the reporter interviewed a police officer who said that there were no signs of violence, forced entry, or robbery. Although this statement could easily have supported either an order or a disorder plot for the story, the local news format clearly favored playing the murder mystery/shocker plot. The reporter announced that the police planned an autopsy the next day and did not know what they would find. The live feed ended with the reporter saying that, in the meantime, they “want to keep a very tight lid on what happened. . . . Live in Lake Mary, Nicole Smith, Channel 6 News.” The next day, it turned out that the woman had died naturally of a heart attack. So much for the “Neighborhood Shocker.” As one observer noted, “Journalism Shocker” would have been a more appropriate on-screen warning.¹¹

The political poster story of the 1990s was about wasteful government spending. Many news organizations, both local and national, have run prominent features on “How government is wasting your tax dollars.” The lure of such dramatic accounts over more representative news descriptions is illustrated in a *Los Angeles Times* investigative series on government spending on computers in different agencies. Even

though the investigation turned up many positive examples of taxpayer dollars well spent, here is how the story opened:

WASHINGTON—After pumping \$300 billion into computer systems in the last two decades, the federal government has compiled a record of failure that has jeopardized the nation's welfare, eroded public safety and squandered untold billions of dollars.¹²

Whether or not most events fit the authority-disorder plot, it is easy enough to make them fit. A news show with a regular feature on government waste will, of course, find some alleged example of waste every time the feature is scheduled. Also, since there are few features on good things the government is doing, examples of government thrift (other than those forced by budget cuts) are less likely to be news.

HOW COMPETING JOURNALISTS WRITE SUCH SIMILAR STORIES

How does the news become so standardized despite competition among journalists for fresh angles? Let's begin with three propositions.

- First, journalists write stories. These narratives organize complex events into familiar, easy-to-grasp communication packages.
- Second, because they seek to avoid ideology or political bias, journalists represent those stories as neutral or impartial (codes for "objective") renderings of political reality.
- Third, because many stories continue into the future, journalists face the constant prospect of how to advance a story even when there may be nothing new coming from the principal actors to report.

On the face of it, there is nothing inherently wrong with the narrative form. People grasp stories intuitively and generally find them more engaging than dry analyses. One may learn more about a period in history from reading great novels than standard academic works—or from reading academic works presented as dramatic narratives. In practice, however, the narrative style of American journalism often translates into a strange combination of (1) uncritical reporting of staged political dramas crafted by professional consultants for the purpose of being reported as objective political happenings, (2) followed by scathing press criticism of the very same politicians later on when the supply of new plot developments is not coming fast enough from the spin doctors, or when opponents go on the attack and provide more personalized and dramatic material.

This dynamic produces a steady supply of news even when there is little of substance to report. This explains how journalists can compete often ruthlessly for the next detail in a story and all end up sticking to much the same daily story line. And, if one news organization drifts away into new plot territory (unless it is on the trail of a

bombshell tip), the implicit principle of objectivity leads the editors to ask their journalists how come they didn't get the story right (i.e., the same as the other leading organizations). Finally, when challenged as to why the news so often takes on a numbing sameness, journalists can cite the code of neutrality (objectivity) that forces them to cover what they are offered by politicians even if it seems contrived or tedious. In an acerbic look at how so many competing reporters manage to converge on such unhelpful information formats, Joan Didion describes the code of Washington reporting:

The genuflection toward "fairness" is a familiar newsroom piety. In practice the excuse for a good deal of autopilot reporting and lazy thinking but in theory a benign ideal. In Washington, however, a community in which the management of the news has become the single overriding preoccupation of the core industry, what "fairness" has often come to mean is a scrupulous passivity, an agreement to cover the story not as it is occurring but as it is presented, which is to say, as it is manufactured.¹³

These simple reporting codes explain a great deal about the information system that the American people live with. Cut into this system where you will, each player—whether political actor, journalist, or citizen—has a different view of it. Yet the result is a remarkably standardized information system that has a set of clearly recognizable biases, which we shall explore in greater depth in the remainder of this chapter. The system produced by this core code is competitive, adversarial, and fully captivating for those insiders (politicians and the press) who are caught up in it. It is equally off-putting for those members of the public who often see themselves as outsiders. In a poll taken after the unpleasant coverage of the Clinton-Lewinsky sex scandal, fully 72 percent of the public felt that the press was driving the story rather than just reporting the facts.¹⁴ The main point is that we can begin to understand how journalistic choices are made and how the information biases described in this chapter become inscribed in so much of the news. For example, we can understand why most journalists who told and retold the story of the Clinton-Lewinsky sex scandal covered the tawdry details and not the political motives or the questionable links among those who served up those details to the press. In his review of Didion's book, prominent journalist Joseph Lelyveld summarizes Didion's criticism of Michael Isikoff, a reporter who brought much of the scandal to light:

Isikoff—the *Newsweek* reporter who brought Linda Tripp and Lucianne Goldberg and, through them, Monica Lewinsky into all our lives is taken to task for precisely this: for following the trail as it was being laid out for him to the Oval Office, without dwelling on why those particular breadcrumbs were being dropped before him and who was dropping them. For him what mattered was the promise of an exclusive.¹⁵

Yet journalists cannot see it this way. As Lelyveld notes, most Washington insiders—both politicians and journalists—would see this account as "wickedly" off target:

Far from belonging to a permanent class that conspires to shape a common "narrative," the insiders would argue, they are at one another's throats: the journalists

are seeking to find out what is really going on, to avoid being deflected by “the spin,” while their adversaries, the politicians and their spinners, battle to get their story out without filters. Why have campaign days become so inane repetitive? Because the politicians are afraid to say anything spontaneous on which reporters—and thereafter their opponents—may seize. . . . Why in the end do journalists retail what is manufactured for them? It is not merely on account of laziness or obstruction, they can’t get their mitts on anything else.¹⁶

The complaint that there is little really original news to report in most news events may explain the persistence of one of the oldest political story lines in journalism: the election horse race. Every year, news organizations persist in telling us who is in front, who is trailing, and who is coming up from behind, until someone crosses the finish line on election day. Journalists stick with these narrative choices in the face of clear voter disinterest. In the 2000 election, for example, the horserace dominated the news—and there was a continuing lack of interest in the election. A majority of Americans became interested in the 2000 contest only after election day, when they discovered that there was no clear winner.¹⁷ Even in the crucial final weeks of the contest, stories with standardized dramatized framings, such as the *horse race*, the *war room*, and other military metaphors outnumbered stories on all the issues in the race, combined, by a wide margin. For example, a study of *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* in the final two weeks of the campaign showed that dramatized framings of the race or the strategic conflict outnumbered all policy issue stories by a margin of 69 to 45 in the *Post*, while the *Times*’ melodrama-to-issue gap was even greater at 93 to 63.¹⁸ Consider the possibility that the choices of such narrative framings of politics contain information biases that are far more serious and at the same time more difficult for the average person to detect than the kinds of ideological biases discussed in the last chapter.

Communication scholar Shanto Iyengar summarizes these information biases by saying that most news is episodic rather than thematic. *Episodic news* parachutes the journalist and the audience into the middle of an already developed situation and puts the focus on the people who are in trouble or in conflict. By contrast, *thematic news* looks beyond the immediate human drama to explore the origins of problems and the larger social, economic, or political contexts in which the immediate news story has developed. Iyengar’s research shows that episodic news, which is the most commonly encountered form of reporting, particularly on television, leaves people with shallow understandings of the world around them. For example, viewers of episodic coverage tend to hold the people at the center of news stories responsible for the problems and conflicts that surround them, rather than see more fundamental social, political, or economic causes at work.¹⁹

Iyengar’s work suggests that the news is an important link in a chain of poor reasoning about social problems. If individuals, alone, are held responsible for problems ranging from poverty and crime on the domestic scene to population explosions and wars on the world stage, then politicians and voters are unlikely to find workable solutions to these problems through their public communication process. The key problem

with most news, in this view, is that when personal and dramatic elements isolate or fragment a story from larger social, historical, or political context, the news fails to offer a basis for learning and generalizing. It is often in such cases, in fact, that some variation on the authority-disorder plot comes into play as a substitute for a larger point to a story.

If personal or emotionally dramatic elements are used to introduce audiences to more abstract ideas or to link stories to each other or to broader ideas, theories, or insights, then they are useful. It is also important to recognize here that *it is not the stories that create information problems with the news, it is how those stories are told*. The conclusion of this book returns to look at how stories might be told differently and with more positive effect on citizen engagement. The following case study shows how to use these biases to analyze news stories, after which we will return for a more detailed look at the four information biases.

Case Study: How George W. Bush Got His Swagger

Let’s return to the passage from *The Washington Post*’s coverage of President Bush’s dramatic aircraft carrier landing that opened this chapter:

When the Viking carrying Bush made its tailhook landing on the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln off California yesterday, the scene brought presidential imagery to a whole new level. Bush emerged from the cockpit in full olive flight suit and combat boots, his helmet tucked jauntily under his left arm. As he exchanged salutes with the sailors, his ejection harness, hugging him tightly between the legs, gave him the bowlegged swagger of a top gun.²⁰

This news event was covered around the world and replayed time and again in the American media. It was hailed by journalists, politicians, and public relations professionals as one of the great publicity events of all time. A news source for communication consultants reviewed the coverage and cited journalists’ lavish praise for the event as: “the mother of all photo opportunities,” the greatest photo-op of all time,” and “the kind of attention that other politicians can only dream of,” among other accolades.²¹ “It has a huge visual impact,” said an admiring Michael Deaver, who created such images for Ronald Reagan, including the Gipper’s famous Normandy speech. “This is a powerful, powerful visual, not only of Bush as commander in chief, but of his strength as a world leader.”²²

What was the connection between the Top Gun image of the president and his qualities as a leader? How did that iconic military moment sit with Mr. Bush’s own military record? And how would the dramatic claim that major fighting was over in Iraq play out as the war turned into a continuing guerilla conflict? The short answer

to these questions is that well-crafted news images often stand on their own, disconnected from more complex realities. A more provocative answer is that the Bush Top Gun moment was not just about the war in Iraq. It was also the culmination of a long running campaign to shape Mr. Bush's leadership image—a campaign that can be traced to his first weeks in office. It was also about the image of the president that the White House communication staff planned to project in the 2004 election. The author of the *The Washington Post* story saw all of this at the time: "Bush aides are planning to make his war leadership the focus of his 2004 reelection campaign, and yesterday's images are crucial in burning that impression into the national cornea."²³

A *New York Times* feature article also viewed the carrier landing in the context of the larger news management operation of the Bush White House:

Pres[ident] Bush's "Top Gun" landing on the deck of [the] carrier Abraham Lincoln is only [the] latest example of how his administration is using [the] powers of television and technology to promote [the] presidency like never before; officials of past Democratic and Republican administrations marvel at how this White House never misses [an] opportunity to showcase Bush in dramatic and perfectly lighted settings; in fact, [the] White House has stocked its communications operation with people from network television who have expertise in lighting, camera angles and [the] importance of backdrops; White House efforts are ambitious—and costly; they include renting the kind of lights used to illuminate sports stadiums and rock concerts and creating scenic backdrops for every Bush speech and appearance.²⁴

This acknowledgment by the reporter illustrates our earlier point that journalists usually recognize what they are covering, yet they still complete the political image-making process by reporting stories much as they have been designed for publicity purposes. As a result, the Bush Top Gun moment was generally reported as designed by the Bush communication team, with few distracting references to larger, well known, realities that would have diminished its dramatic impact.

Picking up the White House spin, reporters soon generated a common script and an image vocabulary that would echo through their stories well into the future. The word that burned the Bush image into hundreds of news reports was *swagger*, which spread through news accounts like a contagion. Papers large and small reported how the president swaggered like a top gun after he deplaned and greeted the cheering sailors on the carrier deck. Television news replayed images that were as well-produced as a music video. Cable news talk shows echoed the Bush swagger effect for months afterward. A Google search on the terms *Bush and swagger* produced more than eight thousand hits, revealing that the term became "sticky" in descriptions of Mr. Bush by admirers and critics alike.

Mr. Bush was even proclaimed a "hottie" by a columnist in the usually austere editorial page of the *The Wall Street Journal*. The *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd offered this comment on the Journal's bout of swagger-mania: "Lisa Schiffrin, a Quayle speechwriter . . . gushed Friday in a *The Wall Street Journal* piece titled "Hey, Flyboy" that President Bush in a flight suit was "really hot . . . as in virile, sexy and powerful." She polled her soccer-mom girlfriends in Manhattan and got the same reaction. "He's a hottie," said one. "Hot? SO HOT!!!! THAT UNIFORM!" said another. A third panted: "That swagger. George Bush in a pair of jeans is a treat to watch." (If it gets any hotter, Wal-Mart may have to ban *The Journal*.)"²⁵

It turns out that journalists did not spontaneously come to the term *swagger*; they were led to it from early on in the administration. The Bush communication team faced major image challenges with a newly elected president who took office with an electoral victory decided by a Supreme Court vote. In his early months as president, Mr. Bush seemed unsure of himself, and news photos often captured him with a deer-in-the-headlights look. One of the first image breakthroughs was a *People* magazine piece appearing the month of the Bush inaugural in which Laura Bush described the family style as being comfortable in jeans. *The Washington Post* soon ran an article in its style section contrasting Mr. Bush's stiff appearance in suits with " . . . a relaxed swagger in his faded jeans."²⁶ By August, swagger had spun out over the Associated Press wires, hitting papers across the land: "With campaign swagger, President Bush told a crowd in Harry Truman's hometown Tuesday that the federal budget has enough money for his massive tax cut and bolstering the military, Social Security and Medicare."²⁷ With *swagger* already on the tongues of journalists, Mr. Bush rode to historic levels of popularity as news events built upon one another, culminating with the landing on the *Abraham Lincoln*.

Like so many news events, the carrier landing story displayed all of the elements of news bias—not because journalists were particularly lax in their reporting, but because they picked up on precisely what makes for a good news story by today's journalism standards. First and foremost, the staging of the landing was *dramatic*: a president in full flight suit—doing a tailhook landing—on an aircraft carrier at sea—to the cheers of its crew just back from the war—and a national news audience ready to celebrate an American victory. It doesn't get more dramatic than that. Even better, the war could be *personalized* through this news event: the president as leader and commander-in-chief had made the fateful decision to go to war, and he now announced proudly that the military phase of the mission was accomplished. What could be easier for Americans to relate to on a personal level, whether they get their news from *The New York Times* or *The Daily Show*?

The very elements that made for a great personalized and dramatic news story, however, also contributed for its *fragmentation*: its disconnection from underlying

factors that might have been important to helping citizens engage with the situation in a realistic way. Some of these disconnections from reality might be excused as innocent sacrifices for sake of a good story. For example, the full-blown image of Mr. Bush as a navy pilot needed to be disconnected from his own military past in order to invite positive personal associations from the audience. The landing on the carrier needed to be disconnected from the carrier's actual situation in order to make the drama credible rather than laughable or even scandalous.

Among the few U.S. news sources to put these contextual realities back in the news picture were a columnist for the Cox newspaper group and an editorial writer for a small South Carolina paper who noted the following, among other things:

1. An initial press briefing told reporters that the president had to fly in on a jet because the ship was hundreds of miles off shore beyond helicopter range and the president did not want to delay the sailors who had been away from home so long. Actually, the ship was just thirty miles offshore at the time of the landing, and the reunion of the sailors with their families was delayed an extra day as the ship made lazy circles just over the horizon to avoid distracting shots of the San Diego skyline in news images of the landing and the speech.
2. The pilot suit with George W. Bush inscribed on the chest obscured the president's own military career, which involved avoiding service in Vietnam with a checkered stint in the air national guard that included not showing up for duty after he was transferred from Texas to Alabama and being discharged eight months early so that he could go to business school.
3. Using an aircraft carrier as a prop and its crew as extras might be a questionable appropriation of public resources for what was at the time planned as an election campaign ad.²⁸

Surely the major disconnection created by the news event was its dubious relationship to the war itself. Consistent with the administration's earlier campaign to generate public support for the invasion, the president's speech called the liberation of Iraq a major victory in the War on Terror. Here is a passage from *The New York Times*:

He spoke in emotional terms not only about the troops who toppled Mr. Hussein, but also about the Sept. 11 attacks, melding the battle against terrorism with the battle against Iraq. "We have not forgotten the victims of September 11th, the last phone calls, the murder of children, the searches in the rubble," he said. "With those attacks, the terrorists declared war on the United States. And war is what they got."²⁹

Although the *Times* noted for the record that the link between Iraq and al Qaeda had not been well established, such slight journalistic allusions to reality were no match for the drama of the moment. Recall the polls from Chapter 1 showing large majorities believing that there was some connection between Iraq and the events of

9/11. That connection was supported by near universal journalistic framing of more than a year of news reports in terms favored by the administration.

After more than a year of war and terrorism alerts, it is not surprising that the news had become preoccupied with issues of *authority and order*. Was the world safer? Was the dictator toppled? Did America win? Is the president in control? Such preoccupations of the disorder-authority bias are better addressed by simple, personalized, and fragmentary news dramas than by exploring complex realities. Both the president's speech and his swagger were aimed at conveying the image that order had been restored at least for a time as Mr. Bush declared "one victory in a war on terror that began on September 11, 2001, and still goes on."³⁰

Let's close this case by returning to the question of why the press reported the administration framing of events so faithfully. Recall our discussion of what leads independent reporters to write stories around blatantly manufactured images, even when they recognize the manipulation that is happening in front of them. The explanation typically offered by journalists is that they have nothing else to report other than what newsmakers offer them. This begs several questions, including why more investigative reporting is not used to balance staged events, or why the known gaps between the staging and other versions of events are not the main focus of the reporting. Let's add to this explanation our point from Chapter 1 about the centrality of news to governing: journalists understand that the real game of politics is about image shaping, and so they tend to pass those images on when they are done well—even if they are actively completing the image formation process in the bargain. It is hard to resist a good story.

FOUR INFORMATION BIASES IN THE NEWS: AN IN-DEPTH LOOK

It is important to be able to recognize each of the basic news biases in action. This section explores more familiar examples of the four biases, with an eye to why news organizations are inclined to pursue stories that fit these information patterns.

Personalized News Revisited

Following the previous overview, *personalized news* can be defined as the journalistic bias that gives preference to individual actors and human-interest angles in events over larger institutional, social, and political contexts. The news is further personalized by creating a brand identity relationship between the consumer and the news product. TV anchors model their delivery styles and even their looks based on the results of market research, and newspapers key in on the lifestyles of readers. This trend toward personalized packaging was pioneered by news consultants, or news doctors, like Philip McHugh: "There has to be an emphasis on human interest and human beings.

You have to have an anchorman who can establish rapport with the audience. . . . It takes a very special kind of personality.”³¹

The media (led by television, the major news source for most Americans) have settled on a formula that is profitable, cheap, and easy to produce, but just not terribly helpful to the citizens who consume this news. So important is this private, emotional bias in the news that it is understood as formal policy in most organizations. Here is an excerpt from a memo by an executive producer of ABC News to his staff:

The Evening News, as you know, works on elimination. We can't include everything. As criteria for what we do include, I suggest the following for a satisfied viewer: (1) “Is my world, nation, and city safe?” (2) “Is my home and family safe?” (3) “If they are safe, then what has happened in the past 24 hours to help make that world better?” (4) “What has happened in the past 24 hours to help us cope better?”³²

One interesting feature of this news maxim is that it has not changed much in the decades since it was written. Consider what Jonathan Wald, producer of NBC's *Today* said after 9/11: “People want to know when they wake up if their world is safe. They look to us for reassurance that things are OK or not.”³³ In today's more sinister news world, the answers to the personalized question of “Is my world safe?” may not be as reassuring, but the personal bias (“my world”) remains as dominant as ever.

Examples of personalized news coverage can be found in virtually any newspaper, magazine, or broadcast. Consider, for instance, the personalization of a familiar political issue, welfare reform, followed by the personalization of an important branch of government, the presidency.

Personalizing an Issue: Welfare Reform News coverage of welfare has been intensive over the past twenty years. The modern era of welfare politics began with Ronald Reagan's Republican revolution in the early 1980s, a time of fierce political battles over cutting welfare benefits to the poor and chronically unemployed. By the late 1990s, Bill Clinton had stolen the Republican thunder and welcomed sweeping cutbacks of government benefits. A common feature of the news over the two decades of policy change was the focus on personal stories, from Reagan's demonized cheaters and “welfare Cadillac” owners, to the hardships experienced by people whose support was cut, to the later success stories of people leaving the support rolls to take productive jobs in society.

Consider, for example, an early *Wall Street Journal* report on an early Reagan era decision to terminate a large-scale public employment program. Despite the numerous big-picture social, political, and economic themes that could have been used to frame the report, this was the opening paragraph of the story:

SAN FRANCISCO—As the chill, first light breaks on a Haight-Ashbury curbside, a street sweeper stops to gather the gutter's yield of leaves, litter, and dog waste. “This job's the best thing ever happened to a poor man,” he says. “It's

feeding babies. When it's over, I'll be putting cardboard in my little girl's shoes, like my mama did me.”³⁴

Although there is a journalistic convention that stories should be organized with the most important information first and the least important facts last, the article did not mention the large-scale social, political, or economic implications of the program cuts until paragraphs eight, nine, and ten. After these brief passages, the article returned to the heart-rending story of the street sweeper's fate.

As Clinton-era reforms of the late 1990s swept through the land, journalists swarmed welfare offices and job-training programs in search of other personal stories to tell. Reflecting the bipartisan consensus behind the reforms, the tone of these stories was positive and authority affirming: The government had done something right for a change. In the process, hundreds if not thousands of poor people got their fifteen minutes of media fame. Indeed, the personalization of their stories was so intense that the news often became part of the plot rather than an invisible recorder of personal experiences. When a German film crew asked how a Milwaukee, Wisconsin, training program had helped a young woman, she did not talk about finding a job or getting her degree. Instead, she announced that “It really helped me with the interview for *Dateline NBC*,” adding that her social worker had coached her on press interview techniques. Another newly placed job holder had worked out a polished sound bite about welfare from FDR to a new beginning of hope. One woman's story cycled from *The New York Times* to ABC, giving her enough news exposure to generate fan mail. In a later *The New York Times* interview, she told a reporter that one of her proudest moments in the transition from welfare to work was when her 11-year-old son declared, “Mama, you're going to be on the news.”³⁵

Personalizing the Presidency Personalized treatments are not just reserved for complex policies or obscure events that people would otherwise have trouble relating to. Even the coverage of government institutions puts personal themes atop the list of reporting priorities. As a result, we learn more about the powerful and glamorous personalities in government than about how government works. As Paletz and Entman observed, “Prime news generally involves prominent, powerful people in action, or, more desirable from the media's point of view, in conflict.”³⁶

A textbook case of personalizing the presidency is press coverage of Ronald Reagan's years in office. From the outset of his presidency, Reagan initiated many domestic and foreign policies of great national and international importance. However, the news formula that quickly emerged in most of the stories about those historic actions was the theme of whether Reagan was personally “winning” or “losing” in his battles with Congress, the bureaucracy, business leaders, and foreign governments. This theme reduced momentous political issues to engrossing but trivial questions about Reagan's personal power, his political “scorecard,” and his risks of public embarrassment. The personal focus on Reagan so dominated the news that he was able to manipulate and enhance his news coverage simply by emphasizing his personal stake in policy decisions.

Reagan's success was not just due to his personal charm and communication abilities. As the case of George W. Bush's carrier landing demonstrated, on-screen political actors rely on professional communications staff to construct media events and communication strategies to take advantage of the predictable biases of the American reporting style. David Gergen was among the first communication strategists who understood the tendency of the press to personalize Washington politics. Before he worked for Bill Clinton, Gergen was one of the media managers who helped Reagan earn the nickname "the Great Communicator" from the national press corps. As Gergen saw it, politicians live or die depending on whether they appear to be personally weak or powerful in news accounts. His strategy was a media version of "the best defense is a good offense" in which his boss was at the center of events carefully orchestrated by the White House. The goal was to create images of confident control that drove out competing suggestions of presidential failure. (The details of this news-management approach are explained in Chapter 4.)

This view of power in the media age has become part of the thinking of Washington insiders. As a result of personal scandals, policy conflicts, and the failure to properly utilize Gergen's talents, Bill Clinton's public approval ratings hovered under 50 percent during many of his major policy initiatives. As a member of his own administration told a reporter: "Any time you have a 48 percent [approval] president, every major vote is a death struggle. You are dealing with members [of Congress] who don't know whether to embrace him or run from him."³⁷ Shortly after Gergen was shuffled out of the Clinton White House, a major crime bill that Clinton supported was voted down in a procedural maneuver in the House of Representatives. Although a slightly revised version of the bill passed two weeks later, every major news organization played the original vote as a huge personal defeat for Clinton. ABC correspondent and National Public Radio (NPR) analyst Cokie Roberts put it this way in an NPR interview the morning after the defeat: "[For Mr. Clinton, it was] not a good day. I could hear reporters in the [press] gallery hammering out 'Stunning Defeat,' 'Staggering Defeat.' I like your [NPR's] 'Stinging Defeat.'"³⁸ NPR further personalized its coverage by adding that the president appeared "visibly shaken" as he addressed reporters afterward.³⁹ Clinton eventually righted his press strategy just in time to help him weather the impeachment storm during his second term in office. So Clinton, like all modern politicians, learned the often painful lesson that the success of his political agenda depended as much on his media image as on the sheer force of his ideas or the strength of his institutional politics.

Perhaps the most personalized arenas of presidential politics are the election campaigns, which also settle into a set of personalized and dramatized news plots that typically relegate issues to a minor place in the media scheme. For example, the 2000 presidential campaign had not even officially begun before the news was brimming with personal problems allegedly plaguing the most visible candidate, Democratic Vice President Al Gore. Gore was dogged by impossible-to-refute charges that his personality was too stiff, that he exaggerated his accomplishments, and that he could not connect with voters. One interviewer noted how personable Gore was in the interview but concluded that the stereotype of woodenness would stick because that was the dominant story in the media.⁴⁰

The Political Costs of Personalized News The focus on winners and losers and on personalities and their personal conflicts gives the news audience a distorted view of power and its political consequences. As Paletz and Entman have concluded, "Power seems to be understood in a limited sense by the media. . . . Stories emphasize the surface appearances, the furious sounds and fiery sights of battle, the well-known or colorful personalities involved—whatever is dramatic. Underlying causes and actual impacts are little noted nor long remembered."⁴¹ Without a grasp of power structures, it is virtually impossible to understand how the political system really works. As a result, the political world becomes a mystical realm populated by actors who either have the political "force" on their side or do not.

In addition, direct emotional projection onto distant news figures can result in highly egocentric and ethnocentric views of the world. The news gives people a me-first view of the world in which "my" well-being, "my" group, and "my" country are emphasized over social realities that differ from one's own. Even the two-sided format used in most reporting provides few intellectual tools for resolving the differences between the sides. To the contrary, the sides are often portrayed as in stark conflict. As a result, the path to easy understanding is to pick the reality that most closely resembles one's own beliefs and prejudices. The next best alternative is to remain confused about how to decide who is right or what is really happening.

Dramatized News Revisited

It is no secret that reporters and editors search for events with dramatic properties and then emphasize those properties in their reporting. Consider the conscious emphasis on news drama in the following policy memo from the executive news producer of a major television network to his editors and reporters:

Every news story should, without any sacrifice of probity or responsibility, display the attributes of fiction, of drama. It should have structure and conflict, problem and denouement, rising action and falling action, a beginning, a middle, and an end. These are not only the essentials of drama; they are the essentials of narrative.⁴²

The weight of such evidence led Paletz and Entman to conclude that "drama is a defining characteristic of news. An event is particularly newsworthy if it has some elements of a dramatic narrative. . . . American officials held hostage in the far-off but journalistically accessible land of Iran provide a particularly strident example."⁴³ Indeed, the hostage crisis that dragged down the Carter presidency offered 444 days of sustained news coverage because it contained so many dramatic angles, almost all of which involved personalized themes and plots: What happened in the story today? How are the hostages? Is the president doing anything to bring them home safely? And, of course, there was the overriding dramatic question that kept people tuning in each day: How will it end?

Dramatized news fits neatly with the personalization bias. Drama, after all, is the quintessential medium for representing human conflict. Promising psychological release and resolution, drama satisfies emotional concerns aroused in the development of characters and plots. Although there are occasional walk-on roles for ordinary

people, the majority of news plots revolve around a cast of familiar officials who play standard roles in news dramas. There are also the rich, the famous, the powerful, and the glamorous, along with plenty of bad guys threatening the lives of decent people.

Among the most familiar bad guys are terrorists. Yet who are they? How do they become cast as terrorists in news dramas? There is no universal standard that defines them because our terrorists are almost always someone else's heroes and freedom fighters. A fascinating study by Steven Livingston shows that in nearly all cases, acts of political violence wait for definition in the news until they are labeled (as terrorist, accidental, or heroic) by government officials who have political reasons for designating some groups bad and others good.⁴⁴

In general, the main principle guiding the casting of newsmakers in their nightly roles has more to do with their potential as dramatic actors than with any natural preeminence they may have in the political scheme of things. For example, in the U.S. government, the three branches share equal power, both under the Constitution and, for the most part, in actual practice. Yet the president is the dramatic news actor par excellence: There is only one of him, he is easy to keep track of, he can be typecast (e.g., as a national father figure, as a staunch defender of freedom against an enemy, or as a flawed character who somehow maintains his public support), and he is easy to bring onto the scene on almost any political pretext. It is also helpful that presidents are usually willing to feed journalists as many dramatic "moments" as the latter are willing to broadcast and print.

By contrast, the justices of the Supreme Court make poor dramatic material, largely because they are reluctant to walk on stage and play for the audience. The small number of articulate, often eccentric, justices would otherwise make wonderful dramatic characters. Also, there is no shortage of available information about court proceedings—it is just that the business of the Court, while important, doesn't fit the news bias toward personalized, dramatic coverage. If the media adopted another information format, the Court might share the front pages with the president—a place more in keeping with its constitutional role.

Congress is another political institution with equal standing under the Constitution but with grossly unequal coverage in the media. A handful of glamorous members of the Senate receive the lion's share of coverage, while the House remains largely a jumbled assembly of nameless seatholders. Washington press observer Stephen Hess has noted the following:

The Senate has the constitutional right to reject a president's treaties and a president's nominees, appealing prospects to a press corps that loves controversy. The Senate is also the incubator of presidential candidates who are then automatically newsworthy. But most important, there are almost four-and-a-half times as many House members as there are senators. As philosopher David Sidorsky notes, the goal of journalists is to transpose "an inherently ambiguous and complex event into a short narrative that can be simply told, have a central plot, and retain the interest of the reader or viewer." It is easier and faster to build a coherent story with a smaller cast of characters. The House of Representatives is too much like *War and Peace*; the Senate is more on the scale of *Crime and Punishment*.⁴⁵

Because of this news bias, members of Congress have learned to play the media game. As Timothy Cook has shown, members of the once obscure House increasingly rely on news management to bring attention to legislation and put the spotlight on political careers.⁴⁶

When Journalists Write the Script Robert Darnton told of his early problems as a journalist before he had learned to parse the dramatic highlights from the dull details of most stories. On one of his early assignments on the city desk of a Newark, New Jersey, paper, he wrote a story of a bicycle stolen from a paperboy. The story was rejected by his editor. A colleague suggested a much more dramatic version involving the boy's love for the bike, his trauma following the theft, and his Horatio Alger-like scheme to pay for a new one. Upon checking this more dramatic new plot against the facts, Darnton decided that reality was close enough to the dramatized version to write the story—a story that was published in his paper.⁴⁷

Lewis Lapham, the editor of *Harper's*, tells of similar experiences in his early days as a reporter. He notes how he marveled at the ease with which the senior reporter in the city room "wrote the accounts of routine catastrophe."⁴⁸ Finally, the old reporter's secret came out:

In the drawer, with a bottle of bourbon and the manuscript of the epic poem he had been writing for twenty years, he kept a looseleaf notebook filled with stock versions of maybe fifty or sixty common newspaper texts. These were arranged in alphabetical order (fires, homicides, ship collisions, etc.) and then further divided into subcategories (fires—one-, two-, and three-alarm; warehouse; apartment building; etc.). The reporter had left blank spaces for the relevant names, deaths, numbers, and street addresses. As follows: "A _____ alarm fire swept through _____ at _____ St. yesterday afternoon, killing _____ people and causing _____ in property damage."⁴⁹

Dramatized news as largely a journalistic creation has progressed to its wildest extremes on local TV. Beyond the focus on mayhem, the delivery and visual formats are painstakingly stylized with the help of news doctors who have developed the so-called action-news format. Nearly all major media markets now have news programs called *Action News* or *Eyewitness News*. Action formats set the pace, delivery, scenery, and casting of the program. The action focus also directly affects the story content and presentation. Consider, for example, the multitude of ways in which a routine event like a murder can be covered. At one extreme, a murder can be reported analytically or, in Iyengar's terms, "thematically," in order to show how various aspects of the crime reflect social problems known to be linked with violent crime (e.g., poverty, family violence, unemployment, alcoholism, social instability, or prison system failures). Such reporting angles are seldom used in action-news programs because they contradict the action philosophy of the news doctors. TV and radio stations in competitive media markets tend to follow the costly advice of news consultants like the pioneering Frank Magid, who reportedly endorsed building a murder story around the dramatic effects of the camera retracing the route of the killer as he stalked his victim. Such reporting, according to Magid, has the virtue of making you feel "as if you were really there."⁵⁰

As the preoccupation with action news has grown to dominate the business, dramatization has become routine—to the point of using the events in the story as mere foils for sensationalism. For example, local stations have purchased expensive helicopters, airplanes, and remote transmission equipment to enhance their action-news image. Such equipment usually becomes a visible feature of the station's news coverage, both to justify its expense and to ensure that the news program lives up to its action-news advertising. As a result of this built-in bias in favor of action reporting, a new breed of news stories has begun to appear: stories that have less to do with the importance or meaning of an event than with the capacity to use costly equipment and to convey images of drama and action in covering the event.⁵¹ TV journalists talk to us from high-tech choppers and sleek vans while rushing to news scenes where they may become the most animated actors present. Routine stories are enhanced by cutting live to a reporter sitting in the newsroom somewhere beyond the anchor desk.

Dramatized news is more melodrama than serious theater, more soap opera than Shakespeare. One does not leave the theater after watching *Hamlet* with the feeling that poor Hamlet was a real loser. If journalists pursued more serious dramatic techniques, the results might be less objectionable. It would not require the talents of a Shakespeare to make big changes in the way the news selects and represents reality. In legitimate drama, including many movies and popular novels, one is made aware of the role played by history, institutions, power, conflict, hidden interests, and accident in human affairs. These factors are usually missing in news melodrama.

The Political Costs of Dramatized News The most obvious effect of dramatization is to trivialize news content. In place of unswerving attention to major events and problems, there is an increasing tendency to substitute manufactured drama. Even when the drama may reflect an actual feature of the situation, as in the case of a congressional vote, the preoccupation with drama often distracts attention from any broad or enduring political significance the event may have had. The action imperative feeds on events that have some rapidly developing action to report. One result, as Gaye Tuchman has observed so cogently, is that chronic social problems and long-standing political issues often go unreported because they develop too slowly.⁵² In these respects, dramatization compounds many of the same effects of personalization.

Its unique blend of emotionalism and dramaturgy sets American journalism apart from other news systems, while setting Americans apart from the world they live in. Fiction writer Don DeLillo has captured these aspects of foreign affairs coverage:

I think it's only in a crisis that Americans see other people. It has to be an American crisis, of course. If two countries fight that do not supply the Americans with some precious commodity, then the education of the public does not take place. But when the dictator falls, when the oil is threatened, then you turn on the television and they tell you where the country is, what the language is, how to pronounce the names of the leaders, what the religion is all about, and maybe you can cut out recipes in the newspaper of Persian dishes. I will tell you. The whole world takes an interest in this curious way Americans educate them-

selves. TV. Look, this is Iran, this is Iraq. Let us pronounce the word correctly. E-ron. E-ronians. This is a Sunni, this is a Shi-ite. Very good. Next year we do the Philippine Islands, okay?⁵³

Dramatized news also creates another information dilemma: the temptation for news organizations to look for the most extreme cases rather than the most representative examples of a subject. The preoccupation with drama makes it hard to draw the line between journalists as reporters of fact and as creators of fiction. After noting that drama is a requirement for a major news story, Paletz and Entman observed that some stories deficient in their own "high drama" may "have drama grafted on." "Journalists have been known to highlight if not concoct conflict and to find characters to symbolize its different sides. One reason: to attract an audience that is thought to have little patience for the abstract, the technical, the ambiguous, the uncontroversial."⁵⁴

Because dramas are simple, easy to grasp, and offer a semblance of insight into the individual motives behind an action, they may give people a misguided sense of understanding the politics of a situation. People may think they understand an issue when, in fact, their understanding is based on a mixture of fantasy, fiction, and myth. Under these circumstances, according to Lapham, the political world becomes sheer abstraction, and "we exhaust ourselves in passionate arguments about things that few of us have ever seen. We talk about the third world as if it were a real place rather than a convenient symbol, about the gears of the national economy as if it were as intelligible as the gears on a bicycle."⁵⁵ This, ultimately, is what is wrong with the false sense of understanding conveyed by melodramatic news: It leaves people unprepared to deal effectively with serious social problems. The human capacity for planning, compromise, and sensitive analysis dissolves in the face of crisis, confrontation, and simplistic images.

We shall see later on that the public is not as simpleminded as the news experts assume, but this is beside the point. Nowhere in journalism texts is news defined as "whatever the audience wants, no matter how contrived or irrelevant." News, at least in theory, is supposed to inform people, not merely entertain them. The trend toward ever more dramatic and entertaining news may mean that a new form of communication is emerging. This evolving communication form may still go by the term *news*, but it would be a serious mistake to assume that the traditional meanings of that term still apply. As noted in Chapter 1, for example, large numbers of people regard cop shows and other dramatized reality programs as news.

In a world where political events are already far removed from the immediate experience of the average person, news dramas may push political consciousness permanently into the realm of fiction. This principle applies equally to coverage of foreign affairs and to issues seemingly much closer to home, like crime. For example, a big-city television station produced an expensive and much-advertised documentary special on violent crime. The newspaper and television ads were dominated by the horror movie use of the word *fear*, which seared the page and dripped from the TV screen. True to its advertising, the program presented numerous examples of particularly violent crimes and showed how local people reacted to them. When the news adopts the

images of popular drama and literature, it is little wonder that people begin to confuse reality and fantasy. As the following personal statement of a newspaper columnist indicates, our own lives become dramatized:

Is it possible for a woman to walk along, footsteps echoing through the night city, without feeling as if she's performing in a Brian DePalma movie? I can't. I've been conditioned into DePalma-style reflexes: twitches and eye rolls, in response to any unlikely sight or sound. What is that shape moving shadowlike in the alley? Is that a garbage bag or a man hunkered down in the service doorway? If I venture out alone after midnight, I enter an atmosphere as different from the everyday world as if I've gone under water. I can hear my own breathing, the hammering of my heart, the clickety-clack of my heels on the pavement. Unescorted, I am accompanied by fear, chaperoned by phantoms of my own imagination. Why has that man changed direction, just as I've turned the corner? Is that he now walking behind me?⁵⁶

There is no doubt that being a victim of a crime is a fearful prospect, but so are things like lung cancer, poverty, hunger, unemployment, homelessness, war, AIDS, and many other social "disasters." The news audience is exposed to more fearful images of some of these issues than others—not because they are inherently more or less fearful, but because the conditions conducive to media melodrama come together more coherently around some issues than others. Crime is an issue tailor-made for hyperdramatism. Almost everyone agrees it is a problem and should be eliminated; almost everyone agrees that criminals are bad and have no excuse for their behavior; politicians get a lot of mileage from talking about an issue that is guaranteed to produce a supportive response from a scared public; and the media appear to be performing a useful public service by running cautionary stories on the issue. The result, however, is that the popular fear of crime is way out of proportion to the chances of ever being affected by it, and tax dollars may be thrown at emotionally satisfying solutions that have little real impact on the problem.

Here, then, is the sequence of political effects flowing from dramatized news: (1) distraction from potentially important causes of problems, (2) creation of a false sense of understanding rooted in individualistic explanations, and (3) the political promotion of dramatically satisfying but practically unworkable solutions. As Murray Edelman has argued so persuasively, many of the chronic problems that diminish the quality of life both nationally and on the world stage are surely worsened by the way they are represented in the news. The news has become a means of turning problems into political spectacles that drown out serious debate, while creating an appetite for quick dramatic resolutions on the part of audiences.⁵⁷

Fragmented News Revisited

Lifting actors out of political context and surrounding their actions with titillating but irrelevant fantasy themes make it very hard to put together a coherent picture of the world.⁵⁸ News fragments exist in self-contained dramatic capsules, isolated from each other in time and space. The impression given by the news is of a jigsaw puzzle that is out of focus and missing many pieces. When focus is provided, it is on the individual

pieces, not on how they fit into the overall picture. When information is delivered in such fragments, people are invited all the more to project their own interpretations onto the world. In place of new information about situations, information is either cast adrift or assimilated into old plot formulas. In either case, the world is reduced time and again to myriad encapsulated happenings, each with its own emotional coherence but isolated from the others. The world appears fragmented and confusing, even though each of its parts is coherent and dramatically whole. With respect to information fragmentation, the news defies the old adage that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. In news reality, the whole is decidedly less than the sum of its parts. Columnist Russell Baker once parodied the typical newscast in the following terms:

Meanwhile, in Washington, the . . . Administration was reported today as firemen still sifted through the ruins of a six-alarm blaze in Brooklyn that left two Congressmen, who were said to have accepted cash contributions from Korean agents, despite their fifth defeat in a row at the hands of the Boston Celtics. . . .

Seventeen were dead and scores injured by the testimony that two Senators, whom he declined to name, rioted in the streets of Cairo following her son's expulsion from school for shooting a teacher who had referred to him in the easy-going style of the . . . White House, as exemplified by the dispute over the B-1 bomber.⁵⁹

Lacking real guidelines for analysis and criticism, media efforts to be analytical or critical can border on nonsense. Edwin Diamond tells the story of a network news producer who visited a seminar at MIT devoted to television news. The producer proudly showed a videotape of a recent "analytical" report on the economy. Diamond describes the report and his students' reaction:

There was the anchor wishing us good evening; cut to the Washington reporter with the latest inflation bad news; then quickly three consumer reports from around the country; then a U.S. map with graphics showing cost-of-living rates; back to the anchor and then the Washington reporter, followed by tape and sound "bites"—15-second quotes—from congressional leaders and cabinet officers. Finally, a Wall Street reaction . . . and then break for commercial. In all, no more than three minutes had elapsed.

As the various tape, sound, and graphics parts in the economics package gave way to each other, the producer snapped her fingers and whispered "hit . . ." right in time with each element. She was proud of the network handiwork, but students in the classroom shot up their hands. What was that all about? What did it mean? What were you trying to tell us about the economy? . . . When we all watched the videotape once again from the point of view of the audience—people who know little about the effort that goes into the smooth mingling of tape and sound videofonts and slides, and care even less—we had to admit that it was difficult to grasp, sort out and understand the news somewhere underneath all the production.⁶⁰

As this example illustrates, action news often tries to imitate analysis by trading in the story format for news collages, called "clusters" in radio and television, which contain

many images with few coherent connections.⁶¹ Similar fragmentation effects are achieved in newspapers, which jump back and forth between interviews, actors, scenes, factual information, and plots. Recall, for example, how the newspaper article on the elimination of the government job program required the reader to make the leap from the isolated personal case of a San Francisco street sweeper to the broad economic implications involved.

Long-term trends and historical patterns are seldom made part of the news because it is hard to tell them as simple stories. Events spring full-blown, from out of nowhere, into the headlines. In place of seeing a coherent world anchored in clear historical, economic, and political tendencies, the public is exposed to a world made chaotic by seemingly arbitrary and mysterious forces.

Fragmented news has a life and a reality of its own. Story plots are self-contained and incorporate broader social context only at the peril of overloading the simple melodrama of the moment. A shred of credibility is added to the mix by documenting that at least most of what is reported actually happened. Never mind that much more of what actually happened went unreported.

The Political Costs of Fragmentation There are, of course, numerous “good reasons” for such reporting. Journalism’s hallowed prohibitions against commentary and interpretation seem to justify the representation of events as isolated, no matter how interrelated they may be. Moreover, press releases from official news sources seldom take pains to point out inconsistencies, complex relations, or other big-picture aspects of events. These strategies of propagandists are rewarded by the journalistic preoccupation with daily news, which means that the news slate is often wiped clean each day. Update sections are relegated to the backs of newspapers, and analysis pieces are saved for slow news days in radio and television broadcasts.

The imperatives for drama and action further separate stories from one another. Because dramatic formats contain their own plots and resolutions, linkages between these news capsules can reduce their impact and confuse their plots. In fact, connections between news stories can raise the unsettling idea that nothing should be taken at face value and that behind every story there is a still larger story.⁶² An unfortunate by-product of using the story as the basic unit of news reporting is that linkages among stories tend to complicate simple, if isolated, realities. By contrast, other forms of presenting information such as ideologies or theories use connections among issues and events to simplify explanations and enhance meaning.

Consider, for example, how personalization and dramatization also invited fragmentation in the great health care debate of the 1990s, which drew attention to the plight of some forty million Americans who lacked medical insurance for illness or accident. Instead of putting the focus on how everyone could be accommodated under some new health plan, news reporting generally settled on a more dramatic and personal plot involving the paralyzing issue of whether people already receiving health coverage would have to face change and uncertainty. Doctors, insurance associations, and other opponents of the Clinton plan fed so many fearful images into the media that they quickly drove the story into the fragmentary exchange of scary emotional charges and countercharges.

According to communication scholar Kathleen Jamieson, the coverage quickly strayed from the ways in which a workable policy might be achieved. Audiences were

treated, instead, to a mix of fearful threats about loss of existing coverage and to a series of personalized battles between the president and Congress. Individual members of Congress became personally identified with a confusing list of alternative proposals as the attacks on the president’s plan multiplied. Even Hillary Clinton came under heavy fire for her role in organizing policy groups to work out details of a plan. Above all, the leadership and authority of the president became the focal issue in the news.

In the end, the entire episode was framed as a political game in which the president’s authority was a primary issue, and the capacity of the national government to conduct orderly business was implicitly questioned. The president was described as losing his biggest policy battle to date, and doubts were raised about the ability of government to accomplish major national goals.

Instead of cutting off connections to surrounding political contexts, the news could have put the focus on many larger questions about the propriety of the health industry’s role in defeating health reform or about the trails of campaign contributions from that industry to members of Congress who suddenly emerged as opponents to reform. These issues were raised but never became dominant frames for the story. Once again, news biases conveniently capsulized events at the expense of broader understandings. What happened to public understanding of the issues after such intensive news coverage? A disturbing study by the Times Mirror (now Pew) Center for the People & the Press found that fewer Americans understood key aspects of the Clinton administration health care plan after three months of intense news coverage than at the time the plan was first announced.⁶³

It is no wonder that public opinion studies show that a majority of people have trouble thinking in abstract, logically integrated ways about political issues. An inventory of findings from public opinion research sounds like a list of the effects of news fragmentation: The average person has trouble stating clear positions on issues; most people tend to remember few facts about important issues; the majority of people see few connections between issues; and many people change their opinions easily about issues. John Zaller’s research on a number of foreign policy situations from Vietnam to the Gulf War suggests that the more “informed” people are about a situation, the more they simply take their cues from the party leaders and political elites who dominate the news.⁶⁴

Mort Rosenblum, a respected foreign correspondent for the Associated Press, wrote a passionate book about why the world depicted in the American news always seems on the verge of chaos. The book’s title is provocative: *Who Stole the News? Why We Can’t Keep Up with What Happens in the World and What We Can Do About It*.⁶⁵ His comparison of the BBC *News Desk* and the CBS *Evening News* suggests that the difference between British and American coverage patterns and priorities is so vast that they might as well be broadcasting from two different planets! In an interview with Rosenblum, CBS *News* anchor and managing editor Dan Rather seemed helpless to explain why his newscast led with the story of a Maryland man who was shot in an attempt to steal an FBI car—on a day in which the siege of Sarajevo had reached a crisis point and the Peruvian government captured that nation’s most notorious revolutionary leader. As journalist Mark Hertsgaard concluded about Rosenblum’s critical look at American news:

The unfortunate truth is that, for many Americans, the rest of the world does not really exist. It's more an abstraction than a real place where real people catch the bus to work, read newspapers, raise children, live lives. Our consciousness can be pierced if outsiders start making trouble for us—if swarthy, bearded “fanatics” take Americans hostage or cut off our oil supplies—but by the time we start paying attention, it's often too late; events have taken on their own momentum and there is little choice but to live with the consequences.⁶⁶

The Authority-Disorder Bias Revisited

It is no wonder that details of policy debates often escape the public, even when issues receive considerable news coverage. As several of our examples indicate, intense news coverage can undermine understanding of a situation at the same time that people become more concerned and emotionally involved in it. Part of this disorientation is a result of the biases in many news stories that put disproportionate emphasis on what authorities are doing (taking charge, losing control, winning, losing, or in partisan conflict), and whether the situation in question seems to be moving in a more orderly and reassuring or disorderly and disturbing direction.

Authority plots and order-disorder images provide easy material when larger contexts surrounding events are cut off. Writing dramatic endings for fragmented stories often becomes the highest imperative in the newsroom. Sometimes authorities save the day, and order is restored to some corner of society. Sometimes authorities fight valiantly, but the forces of evil are simply overwhelming, and disorder seems to prevail. In other cases, such as health reform, authorities appear to be weak or deceitful or too preoccupied with their personal squabbles to get anything done, and both authority and order are challenged in the news. The point here is not that news accounts are fictional. Most news stories document aspects of the actual events being reported, but they are often selective in their documentation and tangential in their focus on what is important about a story. The point is that since the biases favoring dramatized, personalized, and fragmented news also favor writing images of authority and order into scripts in the first place, news organizations also have considerable dramatic license as to whether these authorities appear to be solving problems or restoring order in society.

Perhaps the greatest dilemma facing news decision makers is how to resolve this built-in tension between choosing the most dramatic endings for news accounts and the most representative or accurate ones. For reasons discussed in Chapter 3, journalistic misrepresentations find their way into many serious and sensitive areas of social life. For example, Robert Entman shows that news coverage of affirmative action (the policy of providing educational and employment opportunities to minorities) in the 1990s vastly distorted actual public opinion on the subject. Even though polls at the time showed upwards of 70 percent of Americans favoring some sort of affirmative action in society, news stories portrayed society as racially divided, hopelessly in conflict, and unable to solve this paralyzing problem. In what Entman calls a process of “manufacturing discord,” the media told of a “tide of white anger,” “backlash in the white community,” and “deep despair among blacks.”⁶⁷ Entman argues that in reality,

the media represented the views of the most extreme politicians and news commentators as typical of the entire society. He suggests that the story could easily and more accurately have been told as one involving broad support among Americans on a difficult issue that a few extremists had attempted (but failed) to make politically disruptive and racially divisive. The only trouble with that sort of news, of course, is that it is not nearly as dramatic. Manufactured disorder is far more dramatic.

Of course, there may also be genuine crises of authority or challenges to social order in the news. It is important to be able to distinguish between the politically genuine and the journalistically contrived. In the modern era, grand news stories such as Vietnam and Watergate are obvious examples of serious challenges to authority and order that were far bigger (e.g., more enduring, triggering more citizen activism, engaging more news makers, and touching on more issues) than could be easily created and contained with dramatically enhanced news writing. Wrenching national experiences such as Watergate or Vietnam are often regarded by historians and political scientists as exceptional historical events. Many journalists also regard them as exceptional in marking the beginnings of trends toward more critical watchdog (critics would say scandal-oriented) journalism.⁶⁸ For our purposes, there is an important distinction between these landmark conflicts in history and routine journalistic dramatizations of authority and disorder:

- The authority-disorder bias clearly operates by isolating (fragmenting) a particular story from surrounding social or historical trends and dramatizing it in terms of far more one-dimensional plot formulas (e.g., as political game, leadership challenge, sign of social breakdown) than would be warranted by examining it in broader historical, political, or factual context.
- By contrast, grand historic moments generally emerge in the news by breaking down the plot formulas of routine stories and following trails of documentary information into society or institutions. In these cases, issues of authority or order are not used to wall off news episodes from surrounding contexts but to open up questions about the meaning of events and widely shared social experiences.

In the 1960s, for example, with millions of antiwar protesters in the streets and a national civil rights movement in full swing, one could argue that authority was palpably challenged by large numbers of people and that society was in some disorder. In the case of Watergate, the authority of the presidency was used to carry out and then cover up a long list of illegal activities. The news became a forum for debates about abuses of power and grounds for impeachment. Recent years have witnessed few incidents that plausibly qualify as constitutional crises, and there have been no riotous social movements challenging the legitimacy of the system itself. One important exception has been the ability of the Religious Right to make effective use of the media to amplify its claims that moral order is threatened in contemporary American life. Some social movements such as the antiabortionists and neo-Nazis have taken the law into their own hands. In general, however, authority-disorder stories are grafted onto the news by news organizations' application of formulas.

The more disturbing these news treatments become, the more likely they are to score hits as “talker” or “water cooler” stories (what people talk about at work the next day) that news directors press their staffs to create. For example, it has become common to hear people talking about abuse of the legal system to win large settlements on ridiculous liability claims. A classic story of the 1990s was the McDonald’s lawsuit in which a woman won a huge settlement from the fast-food company because she was burned by hot coffee. As political scientists William Haltom and Michael McCann have demonstrated, however, the woman’s claim was far more reasonable than it was portrayed in the news. Moreover, the numbers of frivolous lawsuits and extreme settlements have actually decreased, not increased, as implied in the steady stream of disturbing news accounts.⁶⁹

The Political Costs of the Authority-Disorder Bias Among the most common story lines used by journalists is one that goes like this: “Something has gone awry in the world today, but officials are hopeful that the situation will return to normal soon. And now, for a report from the scene, we go to. . . .” The plot thickens when different officials disagree about what measures are appropriate to the restoration of normalcy, or, failing that, when journalists stir up the story by asking an authority-challenging question designed to get a reaction that can be reported as a new development. There are generally two dramatic outcomes or resolutions possible for these authority dramas. One standard ending for the news drama is that some official action wins out, the day is saved, and the story ends with a return to “normal.” Alternatively, a course of action fails, or is challenged by another player, and authority and social order are left in doubt. The problem is that either of these dramatic endings is likely to put the focus on pseudoissues rather than on the underlying politics of the situation. In more routine cases of everyday news, whether the balance is struck on the side of authority and order or on the side of mistrust and disorder, this central news bias displaces other possible ways of representing events. Even worse, with the balance tipping more in the direction of negative and disturbing news, the authority-disorder bias can become distorted to the point of seriously misrepresenting society and politics. We have already discussed coverage of crime and affirmative action as important examples of this problem.

It can be argued that crime and racial opportunity are, at least, real problems even if they are distorted in the news. Many other stories come dangerously close to being made up, at least in the sense that extreme and unrepresentative cases are offered as though they are typical or commonplace occurrences. As discussed in Chapter 3, for example, news magazines have turned distorted and misleading reporting into a formula: “Scare them and they will watch.” Grainy hidden-camera videos and dramatic editing and writing create the impression of a sinister world in which a host of threats and dangers lurk behind the orderly facades of the supermarket or the doctor’s office.

A prominent journalism review investigated a fairly typical hidden camera exposé on ABC’s *PrimeTime* several years after the segment won two journalism awards. The piece was on how medical laboratories often worked too quickly and missed many early warning signs of cancer in women’s Pap smears. The show sent producers in disguise into a lab in Arizona and had another producer pose as a new customer who needed a large number of Pap smears read over a weekend (a tactic designed to

overwork the lab technicians and create errors in reading the Paps). Sure enough, the lab was reported as having a number of warning signs on the tests. However, according to the journalism review’s evaluation of the piece, what the news magazine never reported was that the lab’s results were well within normal industry standards for what turns out to be an imperfect and hard-to-read test. Instead, the story created the appearance of sinister lab operators routinely endangering women’s health. The overall result was that the lab in the report went out of business, ABC News won two awards, and the audience may have been needlessly scared, not to mention selectively misinformed, about a number of aspects of cancer detection.⁷⁰ Perhaps information is beside the point with scare TV.

Whether it arbitrarily emphasizes the good or the bad, this sort of daily news falls short of its ideal function of presenting representative accounts of social and political life so that people can draw informed conclusions from them. It is closer to the mark to conclude that the news helps people confirm their favorite political stereotypes because those dramatic distortions fit better with the implicit guidelines for selecting and writing news stories. As one critic observed, both the public and journalists are involved more in a process of creating convenient fictions than discovering convincing facts: “We are all engaged in the same enterprise, all of us caught up in the making of analogies and metaphors, all of us seeking evocations and representations of what we can recognize as appropriately human. Stories move from truths to fact, not the other way around.”⁷¹

BIAS AS PART OF THE POLITICAL INFORMATION SYSTEM

Consider the picture so far: Each day news consumers are bombarded by dozens of compartmentalized, unrelated dramatic capsules. Some emotional satisfaction can be derived from forming strong identifications with or against the actors who star in these minidramas. But what about facts? What about knowledge and practical information? Unless the consumer has an existing interest or perspective on the subject, recalling facts from the news resembles a trivia game played alone. Most people cannot remember three-fourths of the stories in a TV news broadcast immediately after watching it, and information recall about the remembered quarter is sketchy at best.⁷²

There is now a sizable literature that reads like an inventory of these problems.⁷³ The tendencies toward personalization, dramatization, and fragmentation have all been remarkably enduring over time, although they may have become more exaggerated with the economic pressures of the business explained in the last chapter. While the focus on authority and order is also an enduring defining feature of the news, the shifting balance from order to mayhem and the unreflectively negative tone toward officials has left many observers puzzled and concerned. Indeed, many politicians say they have left government because of the relentlessly negative media scrutiny, while others have surrounded themselves by legions of media consultants and handlers. At the same time that many journalists criticize their own product in these terms, they confess being helpless to change it under the current system of profit- and ratings-driven business values.

NEWS BIAS AND DISCOURAGED CITIZENS

The general perspective developed in this book is that each aspect of the political information system described here is influenced by the others. For example, the weakness of journalism norms and cultural values for educating citizens may result in citizens who are easily discouraged from thinking seriously about serious issues. This, in turn, may encourage political actors to employ superficial and emotional public relations techniques in their presentation of partisan political issues and policy choices. Sensing little public interest in hard news and having few resources for investigative reporting, the press passes off these strategically crafted political messages as the substance of the story of the day, perhaps overlaid with cynical commentary about the political games being played by politicians. This core of daily political news is interspersed with scandals and personal dramas justified by ratings reports suggesting that, despite their protests to the contrary, many people really do follow these spectacles.

Whether people follow scandals and mayhem as guilty pleasures or with anger and disgust, the convenient claim by media executives—that this is really what people want—misses at least two important points. First, many people are tuning out political news and homing in on more personal information about health, sports, celebrities, fashion, travel, and lifestyles. As explained in later chapters, these trends are occurring despite the abundance of available news topics and the ease of becoming informed. Perhaps most distressing for the future of political participation is that younger generations are most likely to tune out hard news. Second, according to research by communication scholars Joseph Cappella and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, even the people who consume news often become discouraged about politics and public life by cynical, negative news.⁷⁴

So the public information cycle goes, one element of the press-politician-public news triangle affecting another in a dysfunctional manner until nearly everyone is dissatisfied. However, few citizens possess enough understanding of the overall system to recommend convincing solutions. Rather than thinking about the information system as a rational process in which objectivity is the highest and most desirable outcome, it makes more sense to think of this system as a game in which the different players are not all playing for the same goals or even by the same rules, but in which each uses the others to achieve particular ends:

- Politicians play for public support and favorable insider buzz by using news management and public relations techniques intended to put their political bias (or “spin”) on news content.
- The press competes for ratings, sales, and “scoops” (being first to break a story), and perhaps most importantly, to avoid being “beaten” on a story by other news organizations. Business-driven news formulas dictate manufacturing the most dramatic audience-grabbing stories for the least cost and with a minimum of attention-distracting complexity. At the end of the day, stories often end up looking much the same from one news outlet to another, but the competition for audiences and the aggression toward politicians create the illusion of independence.

- The people occasionally enter the game as voters or as members of organized interests, searching the news for information that helps them decide what to do politically. Sometimes they find useful information, particularly when they are motivated by interest in a particular issue. Often they turn away, confused or discouraged. For the most part, however, they are the spectators. Political scientist Murray Edelman describes the focus of the daily news as political spectacle, attracting attention for its entertainment value even if it often fails to provide much information that is useful to citizens.⁷⁵

REFORM ANYONE?

These trends offer little promise that, despite tremendous gains in communication technology and the vast potential of the Internet, the news of the future will come any closer than we are today to meeting the information needs of democracy—unless, that is, people such as the readers of this book begin to understand how this information system works and think about how to fix what is wrong with it. In place of thinking seriously about the problems of information in this information age, many people have simply withdrawn from politics and joined the chorus of those who hurl easy criticisms at politicians and press alike. Public disapproval alone has not produced an improvement in the quality of information on which the health of democracy depends. While criticisms of the news are legion, relatively few of those critics offer much in the way of solid proposals for change. Press reform is the subject of the final chapter in this book, but a brief look at one model of more useful news reporting is in order now.

The most recent attempt to create an information system with more of the qualities outlined above is a now-fading movement for *public* or *civic* journalism. Although there is no single approach to this effort at news reform, it generally involves local news organizations inviting citizen participation in shaping news coverage that “encourages civic engagement—especially in elections—and supports communities in solving problems.”⁷⁶ This movement grew impressively in the late 1990s. By 1998, the Pew Center for Civic Journalism had funded sixty-two projects, each involving more than one news organization in coordinating agendas of issue and election coverage through opinion polls and citizen forums in communities.⁷⁷

The irony is that this movement has drawn harsh criticism from prominent journalists and news organizations. For example, editors at the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* have condemned the loss of journalistic independence that comes from letting citizens help decide what is important to cover. Many journalists feel that keeping the focus on a set of issues that may not be the ones government is currently addressing risks crossing the line from objective reporting to issue advocacy. A 1997 survey of media executives sponsored by the Associated Press found little in the way of broad support for the civic journalism movement in the industry. For example, only 14 percent of media executives felt that reporting was improved by news organizations listening to input from “citizens’ juries” or “citizens’ forums.” Fully 33 percent felt that establishing such direct communication links between citizens and news organizations was a bad idea. The executives were evenly divided (35 percent to 34 percent) on

the question of whether crossing the line between reporting and advocacy would further undermine journalism credibility. Perhaps the most damning charge against civic journalism is that it is little more than boosterism, a marketing ploy, or a “gimmick to make publishers feel better about themselves.” A plurality of 41 percent of media executives strongly agreed with these charges, while only 33 percent strongly disagreed.⁷⁸

The closing chapter of the book examines ways in which citizens and a grass-roots media reform movement are trying to move beyond these obstacles to reform. For now, we continue to explore why the news has become so stuck in patterns that seem to satisfy none of its public stakeholders: politicians, journalists, or publics. The next chapter examines news as a political and economic construction with the focus on the economics of the news business. Because the greatest changes in recent times have occurred in the economic conditions affecting news organizations and the shifting social habits of the audiences for news itself, these topics are addressed in the greatest detail. In the process, we will learn a few eye-opening things about the ways in which information is constructed, not with citizens in mind, but for the consumer audiences on which the profits of the media depend. Following this discussion of the social and economic foundations of news, the next four chapters show how the different interests of politicians, the press, and the public converge to actively produce this system of political information that we know as the daily news. The goal is to understand the kind of information that reaches the average citizen and to assess its impact on the quality of public life in the American democracy.

NOTES

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33. Howard Kurtz, “Since September 11 Attacks, TV Morning Shows Rediscover World News,” *Seattle Times*, November 25, 2001, A2.
34. *Wall Street Journal*, June 17, 1981, 1.
35. Jason DeParle, “From the Welfare Rolls to the Starring Roles: TV Offers Recipients Brushes with Fame,” *New York Times*, June 25, 1999, A10.
36. Paletz and Entman, *Media Power Politics*, 16–17.
37. Quoted in Ann Devroy and Don Balz, “The White House Wins Again, but Was the Victory Pyrrhic?” *The Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, November 22–28, 1993, 12.
38. National Public Radio, *Morning Edition*, August 12, 1994.
39. *Ibid.*
40. Joe Klein, “Learning to Run,” *New Yorker*, December 8, 1997, 53–59.
41. Paletz and Entman, *Media Power Politics*, 17.
42. Reported in Edward Jay Epstein, *News from Nowhere* (New York: Random House, 1973), 4–5. Such a conscious statement of a defining characteristic of news is all the more remarkable considering that most journalists have difficulty in clearly defining their professional product.
43. Paletz and Entman, *Media Power Politics*, 17.

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52. Gaye Tuchman, *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1978).
53. Don DeLillo, *The Names* (New York: Vintage, 1982), 58.
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55. Lapham, "Gilding the News," 35.
56. Opening paragraph of a column by Laura Cunningham, *New York Times*, September 3, 1981, Home section, 16.
57. Murray Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).
58. Dan Nimmo and James E. Coombs, *Mediated Political Realities* (New York: Longman, 1983).
59. Russell Baker, "Meanwhile, in Zanzibar. . .," *New York Times Magazine*, February 6, 1977, 12.
60. Edwin Diamond, "Disco News," in *Watching American Politics*, ed. Dan Nimmo and William L. Rivers, (New York: Longman, 1981), 250.
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62. See, for example, Edward Jay Epstein's fascinating suggestion that there may have been a much larger scandal behind Watergate than the one revealed in *All the President's Men* by Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward (New York: Warner Books, 1979). The dramatic plot confined the story to the White House. Moreover, any suggestion of larger conspiracies would have overburdened the already complex plot and undermined the credibility of the neatly contained White House story. See Epstein, "The Grand Coverup," *Wall Street Journal*, April 19, 1976, 10.
63. Reported in Stuart Schear, "Covering Health Care: Politics or People?" *Columbia Journalism Review* (May/June 1994), 36-37.
64. See John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992). See also, Zaller, "Elite Leadership of Mass Opinion: New Evidence from the Gulf War," in *Taken by Storm*, W. Lance Bennett and David L. Paletz, eds. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, 186-209.
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67. Robert Entman, "Manufacturing Discord: Media in the Affirmative Action Debate," *Press/Politics* 2 (Fall 1997): 32-51.
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74. See Capella and Hall Jamieson, *Spiral of Cynicism*.
75. For an exploration of the news as popular spectacle, see Murray Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).
76. Charlotte Grimes, "Whither the Civic Journalism Bandwagon?" (discussion paper Joan Shorenstein Center, Harvard University, February 1999), 3.
77. *Ibid.*
78. *Ibid.*