

Chapter 7

The News Audience: Information Processing and Public Opinion

To give citizens a choice in ideas and information is to give them a choice in politics. If a nation has narrowly controlled information, it will soon have narrowly controlled politics.

Ben H. Bagdikian

The post-baby boom generation—roughly speaking, men and women who were born after 1964 and thus came of age in the 1980s and 1990s—are substantially less knowledgeable about public affairs, despite the proliferation of sources of information. Even in the midst of national election campaigns in the 1980s and 1990s, for example, these young people were about a third less likely than their elders to know, for instance, which party controlled the House of Representatives.

Robert D. Putnam

Increasing numbers of people are tuning out the news because they find it negative, distressing, or discouraging (recall the discussions in Chapters 1 and 3). Unfortunately, this escape from the news is too often an escape from politics and civic life as well. Communication scholar Roderick Hart argues that the way we communicate may even make people feel "saintly" about abandoning politics.¹ Like the politicians, pundits, and critics they hear in the news, many citizens adopt the identity of outsiders battling a hydra-headed monster of government—a system run amok. For many, cynicism becomes an angry stance against a political communication process that offers little beyond targeted messages aimed at shaping opinion, shifting votes, or raising and lowering the chorus of public discontent. This does

not mean that people necessarily buy all or even most of what the politicians are selling. It does mean, however, that when they enter the political arena, the language and choices they find are products of the communication processes outlined in this book.

The most distressing escape from the news and politics has been among young people. According to Robert Putnam, quoted at the opening of this chapter, each generation of young Americans entering society in the last several decades has been less informed, less inclined to follow politics in the news, and less likely to participate in political life than the last. This pattern of generational rejection of politics is unlike anything witnessed in modern times. Here is how Putnam describes it:

Today's generation gap in political knowledge does not reflect some permanent tendency for the young to be less well informed than their elders but is instead a recent development. From the earliest opinion polls in the 1940s to the mid-1970s, younger people were at least as well informed as their elders were, but that is no longer the case. This news and information gap, affecting not just politics, but even things like airline crashes, terrorism, and financial news, first opened up with the boomers in the 1970s and widened considerably with the advent of the X generation. Daily newspaper readership among young people under 35 dropped from two-thirds in 1965 to one-third in 1990, at the same time that TV news viewership in this same age group fell from 52 percent to 41 percent. Today's under-thirties pay less attention to the news and know less about current events than their elders do today or than people their age did two or three decades ago.²

This chapter explores two citizen information trends that have a common source. First, the failure of both news and politics to engage and motivate people—particularly younger citizens—has contributed to alarming information and participation gaps in the American democracy. Second, those who continue to try to find meaning in news content are often frustrated with the negativity, sensationalism, and disconnection from their own political concerns and action options. In both cases, the news frustrates the formation of informed publics on which the quality of democracy depends. On most issues, publics are poorly informed, and those who do follow events are disproportionately older, white, conservative males.³

It may be too simple to blame politics and the media for the public disconnection. It is clear that most people would rather spend their time in public as consumers than citizens. The culture of hostility toward politics and government, while fanned by politicians and media cynicism, surely runs deep in contemporary American culture. Audience attention seldom strays far beyond very personal concerns. For example much as television news producers try to create content to lure the commercially attractive female age 18 to 34 demographic, that group is still the most likely (45 percent) to watch news with the remote in hand, and switch channels when not interested in the next story.⁴ The following section explores the link between news and these qualities of citizen life.

NEWS, CITIZEN INFORMATION, AND PUBLIC OPINION

People cannot make contact with distant others or form a coherent body of public opinion without embracing some issues and ideas in common. Consider just three of the many ways in which news content matters:

1. *The formation of publics.* In an age in which people may have more in common as talk show or television audiences than as workers, neighbors, or members of political parties or other social institutions, they pick up their political cues and public identities most easily through media experiences. As a result, individuals seldom join together as publics without reliance on media cues and images.
2. *Political awareness and importance of issues.* News coverage varies in the volume of attention devoted to a few dramatic issues and the scant attention to many others. This emphasis affects the importance that people assign to issues and whether they know enough to even form meaningful opinions.
3. *Shaping political thinking and behavior.* Not all political messages in the news affect individual thinking, but some do. Marketing research is aimed at finding messages that appeal to popular thinking, and communication consultants are paid to develop strategies to get those messages into the news. Even if only a small percentage of voters or “issue publics” change their feelings about a candidate or an issue, that change can affect the outcome of an election or an issue campaign.

The questions of how much and in what ways people rely on media cues still divide many scholars, but few today are willing to admit—as many did just a few decades ago—that the media have only minimal effects on individuals.⁵

THE CITIZEN’S DILEMMA: WHO AND WHAT TO BELIEVE

In considering whether to become involved in public life, people confront a dilemma: If they ignore or discount what they hear from the officials and opinion leaders who make the news, they become isolated and unable to contribute to that most precious citizen resource in a democracy—public opinion. By contrast, people who overcome their cynicism and become part of public life often feel pressured to adjust their views to the available media agenda of issues and credible positions.

Whether they choose isolation, consensus, or escape, people complain that their opinions are often dashed by government inaction, political promises that turn out to be false or misleading, and policies that sounded better in the news than when put into action. These experiences account for the rising tide of political discontent measured in polls and in elections over the past quarter century.⁶ What traps people in this dilemma is that the national political communication process is more often one way than two way, providing little room for grassroots exploration of alternative agendas and programs for public action. Even many citizen revolts—such as the movement to impose term limits on elected politicians—turn out to be organized by interests with ties to traditional politics and big money.

Not surprisingly, this dilemma affects people differently. Some adopt a familiar ideology or party line and embrace it meaningfully, whether or not it seems to be solv-

ing real-world problems. Some abandon politics altogether and step behind a shield of isolation and cynicism. Others decide that participating in public life, for all its dilemmas, is better than leading an isolated existence. One hope for greater public input in defining the agendas of government and society is the use of the Internet to develop and communicate public opinion.

INTERNET VERSUS MASS MEDIA: WHY MAINSTREAM NEWS STILL MATTERS

With the advent of the Web and the Internet, many citizens may end up turning to alternative information channels that deliver politically packaged information that is better integrated with personal interests and various citizen action options. The promise of the Internet for politics lies in low-cost, interactive, and politically focused communication that facilitates rather than discourages citizen engagement. Although more people, particularly young people, are turning to interactive media, the “reality” of politics continues to be shaped by mass media news and the information management strategies of political actors.

Consider the interplay of different media levels in the rise of Howard Dean in the presidential primaries of 2004. Dean’s sudden surge from a long shot to the frontrunner can be attributed in large part to his campaign’s deployment of interactive technologies that informed and mobilized large numbers of supporters very rapidly (see the case study in Chapter 8). However, the campaign team neglected the management of mass media images. Soon after building Dean up as the leading candidate, the national press hatched a story that Dean was hot tempered and too “angry” to attract enough voters to defeat the cool George Bush. The Dean team played into that worrisome story following his defeat in the Iowa caucuses when campaign manager Joe Trippi reportedly urged Dean to give a fiery speech to rally his disappointed young campaign workers. The hot speech violated all the rules of performing on the cool medium of television. The news cameras captured frenetic bursts of finger pointing and arm waving that built to a strange yell that soon became a media icon. The “Dean scream” traveled through the news, talk shows, comedy programs, and the Web, capturing the candidate in an image that will forever join the ranks of bad media moments.

PROCESSING THE NEWS

In the view of political scientists Russell Neuman, Marion Just, and Ann Crigler, “The traditional view of the way citizens gain information from the media is dominated by imagery of a vegetative audience, passively absorbing media influence.”⁷ Because they cite me as holding this view, let me set the record straight: There is considerable evidence that individuals actively select, filter, and personalize the meanings that they draw from the news. Yet whether such engagement makes people feel better about society, relate to others, or act effectively as citizens remain open questions. Moreover, the failure of news to motivate those who are not already interested in the political process, means that the escape from public life (particularly among younger citizens) continues to grow. Communication scholars Thomas Patterson and Philip Seib argue

that the most important function of the media may not be to directly inform citizens, but to first attract their attention and interest. Once people have developed an interest in politics, they are more likely to seek out information that is often available in the media environment.⁸

Without the guidance provided by political interest and curiosity, the information environment can seem overwhelming. One of the pioneers in understanding how people “tame the information tide” is political scientist Doris Graber. Her research on how people process the news reveals that many personal factors shape what people pay attention to and what they think it means: personal interests in the issue or problem; the influence of friends who provide news updates and interpretations; and eventually, the personal frames or models of society that people develop to recognize familiar aspects of news stories. Her latest work is aimed at how to reconnect young citizens with information that engages and motivates them to act politically. She concludes from a research on how the brain processes information that more visual, interactive television and Web-based formats contain the potential to reconnect young citizens.⁹

Most research shows that people develop personal interpretive strategies that help them actively *construct* meanings from the news. In some cases, these constructions can be quite surprising and removed from the apparently intentional meanings in the news (or entertainment) content itself. For example, communication scholar John Fiske found that homeless people residing in a shelter often produced “oppositional readings” of popular television shows, cheering for the bad guys and rejecting the good guys—mirroring the way that “proper society” had rejected them in real life.¹⁰

Sociologist William Gamson shows that people explore news issues in often remarkable depth through everyday conversation, applying various interpretations that were not contained in the news stories they consumed. For example, some people overcome the sense of isolation from events by applying “collective action” frames that address issues of justice, common identities, and the possibilities for social action. Gamson acknowledges that breaking out of the sense of isolation often associated with news frames is easier for people with direct personal experience with an issue. People without direct experience are far more influenced by the framing in news stories.¹¹

Following in this tradition, the studies by Neuman, Just, and Crigler have sharpened our understanding of how people interact with news information. For example, people are less likely to regard even heavily covered issues as important if they feel powerless to do much about them. People are more likely to wade through dense and complex stories if they contain information about “what you can do about the problem.”¹² It also turns out that the medium matters. Contrary to common stereotypes, people actually learn more from television coverage of most issues than from newspaper coverage. It seems hard for most people to decode and organize the greater detail of newspaper coverage unless they already have a personal interest in the issue and, following Graber’s earlier finding, unless they have some personal frame of reference to help sort through the dense newspaper format. News magazines are much more accessible than newspapers and nearly as informative as television, perhaps because they offer more of an overview and a thematic perspective in a weekly format than in daily newspaper installments. This research may provide a simple explanation

for why the vast majority of people prefer television as their primary news source: They actually learn more from it.¹³

WHY PEOPLE PREFER TV: AUDIO AND VISUAL INFORMATION

As noted earlier, people generally learn more from television than from other news media. Not surprisingly, TV is the runaway favorite news source across all the standard demographic divides. Among the general public, TV beats newspapers as the *most important* (not necessarily the only) news source by better than a 2 to 1 margin (56 percent rely primarily on TV, compared to 24 percent for newspapers, 14 percent for radio, and only about 1 percent for magazines). The margin of TV to newspapers goes up to 3 to 1 for women (and better than 4 to 1 for women over age 30), and the 2 to 1 TV preference for whites jumps to 6 to 1 for nonwhites.¹⁴ If we relax the standards a bit, 75 percent say they regularly watch some television news program, with local news leading the way in most age and sex demographic categories.¹⁵

Americans love TV. Some surveys claim that people, on average, get more satisfaction from television than from a wide range of other pursuits, including sports, eating, hobbies, and even sex!¹⁶ Most people watch TV with the explicit expectation of having a pleasurable or emotionally stimulating experience. Perhaps the most interesting commentary on the centrality of television is from a study of people (680 households, 1,614 individuals) whose TV sets were either stolen (19 percent) or broken (81 percent). In 24 percent of these households, people experienced something like a mourning reaction, and 68 percent reported psychological troubles ranging from anxiety symptoms (39 percent) to moderate discomfort (29 percent).¹⁷

Doris Graber notes these and other studies as indicators that TV stimulates the human brain in more comprehensive ways than other print and electronic media do—with the exception of interactive streamed media on the Web. Graber cites research on human brain functions and information processing to conclude that information is not compartmentalized, but continually integrated across different kinds of sensory input. TV, unlike most other news media, gives us words, sounds, and sights to work with. This enriches the sense of understanding and knowing more about televised situations.¹⁸ The important question, of course, how those who produce television news approach their responsibility to carefully select the pictures and sounds that go along with the words.

NEWS FRAMES AND POLITICAL LEARNING

For all that individuals may bring to bear in interpreting the news, there is considerable evidence that news content can greatly affect (if not determine) the thinking of the average person. Recall two important effects that none of the above studies appears to refute. The work of Iyengar and Kinder (see Chapter 2) showed that just making the news made issues seem more important than issues that are not covered, confirming the hypothesis that the news often tells people what to think about.¹⁹ A follow-up series of experiments by Iyengar found that the personalized or “episodic” *framing* of stories directed audiences to think in short-term, emotional, and personalized

ways about issues such as economics and social policy. What is missing in most news coverage, according to Iyengar, are more “thematic” approaches to framing social problems that might encourage people to think about the social, political, and economic forces that affect them.²⁰

It seems safe to conclude that the news biases described in Chapter 2 invite people to think in personalized terms about distant social and political issues. Within this personalized world, individuals surely introduce their own thinking. However, it is not clear what kind of meaningful collective identifications (the first step toward political power) can arise among isolated individuals employing this sort of personalized interpretation. In short, people may not be able to think their way toward effective action just by adopting an independent frame of mind. To the contrary, independent thinking may breed isolation and thus be counterproductive. In the next chapter, we will explore the kind of independent and analytical thinking that can help decode the news in more useful ways.

As noted previously, the most compelling evidence suggests that people interpret the news in more analytical and socially connected ways when they have had direct experience with the issues in question. Recall, too, that people are less likely to find issues in the news important when they feel powerless, and more likely to engage with challenging stories that explain what average people can do to make a difference. From this we may conclude that the sense of being left out of politics may partly explain why so few people are informed about politics and government.

Most Americans score poorly on basic citizen knowledge tests such as the one developed by Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter.²¹ Critics of these tests, such as Doris Graber, argue that they more resemble trivia tests than they measure the kind of practical understandings that might help people navigate through real political situations.²² Yet the names of elected officials or the number of votes required in the House or Senate to overturn a presidential veto are not the only things that are vague in the minds of most people. Few people pay close attention to much of what they see in the news. A survey by the Pew Research Center tracked public attention to more than 670 news stories over a ten-year span and found that only 5 percent of the stories attracted close attention from those polled.²³ The case study in this chapter raises the question of whether Americans have something of an attention deficit disorder when it comes to politics.

Case Study: National Attention Deficit Disorder?

In a recent analysis of the economics of the news, James Hamilton suggests that the conventional “who, what, where, when, and why” of journalism is actually determined by another, more important, set of “five W’s.” “Who cares about information? What are they willing to pay, or others willing to pay to reach them? Where can media outlets and advertisers reach them? When is this profitable? Why is this profitable?”²⁴

What he concludes from this is that economic markets do not create conditions favorable to the open exchange of democratic ideas. Markets aim to deliver consumers to sponsors by nearly any means that work. What gets the attention of consumers may not be what matters to citizens. What media organizations do with audience attention once they have it may have little to do with informing and encouraging political involvement. It is hard to decide what comes first: the marketing of soft features and shocking stories that kill audience interest in more serious information, or a more general withdrawal from civic life that leaves news producers searching for anything to grab audience attention. Either way, the result is a national spiral of inattentiveness to many of the most monumental issues facing the nation.

Consider just a few of the media attention patterns that Hamilton reports in his survey of the habits of news audiences. Less than 10 percent of men and women aged 18 to 34 regularly view a nightly network news program, compared to 23 percent of men and 32 percent of women over age 50. TV news magazines (*20/20*, *Dateline*, *60 Minutes*) outdraw network news audiences in three of six crucial demographic categories (men and women age 18 to 34, and women age 35 to 49). FOX Cable News beats National Public Radio audiences in five of the six key demographic categories; only women aged 35 to 49 listen to NPR more (16.9 percent) than watch FOX (15.9 percent). Cops programs beat NPR in every demographic category except men over age 50. And more than four times as many people watch talk programs such as Oprah and Dr. Phil than follow the PBS *News Hour with Jim Lehrer*. Not surprisingly, few Americans claim to follow politics closely.²⁵ Only one of the six key demographic categories tracked by news marketers (males over age 50) registered a majority claiming to follow politics most of the time.²⁶

Attention was so thin during the 2000 election that the World Wrestling Federation’s *Smackdown!* drew four times the audience as the first debate among the Democratic candidates (and *Smackdown!* barely made the top hundred in the week’s television rating charts).²⁷ A general survey in the 2000 election asked voters to identify presidential candidates by three background characteristics (e.g., a former governor of Texas). Only 12.7 percent of the public correctly identified all three, and fully 30.3 percent were unable to identify even one (including the former governor of Texas who went on to become president).²⁸ Similar levels of disinterest ran through the entire campaign. A majority of people did not become very interested in the election until after it was over, and Americans woke up to discover that there was no clear winner.²⁹

The lack of interest in elections is reflected in the media sources that people pay attention to.³⁰ For example, young voters ages 18 to 29 are seven times more likely (21 percent to 3 percent) to learn about elections from comedy TV shows than voters over age 50. Older voters are twice as likely to pay attention to elections through network news or newspaper coverage. Trends from 2000 to 2004 show that attention to cable and comedy is on the rise, and attention to network and print sources is in decline.

There is some potential for improvement as both voters and candidates begin to find each other on the Internet. The percentage of citizens using the Internet to follow elections increased from 24 to 33 percent between 2000 and 2004, with the greatest gains among young voters. Regular Internet users were among the most informed about candidates and their issues.

A counterargument to the attention deficit syndrome is that measuring whether people attend to the details of news events is like a trivia test that fails to tap how people actually understand politics. Some political scientists claim that people learn what they need to know from talk shows and entertainment programs—at least they learn enough about key issues to form opinions and participate meaningfully in public life.³¹

What is the quality of the information and reasoning on which such distracted participation rests? Recall the discussion from Chapter 1 on the misperceptions about the Iraq War among different media audiences. Even those who watched news programs varied greatly in their understandings of the basis for going to war. Viewers of FOX news were more than twice as likely as viewers of the *News Hour* on PBS to have the basic facts wrong about such key issues as the connections between Iraq and terrorism. This raises the question of whether such unfounded or ungrounded opinions fully qualify people to participate in public life. The even more difficult question is whether politicians prey on public inattentiveness to create poorly informed support for policies they promote.

The political attention crisis is greatest among young citizens. For example, during the hot Democratic primaries of 2004, interest among those under age 30 was cold: 64 percent reported that they were not interested, and few had heard about even the most heavily reported campaign developments. Only 15 percent knew the answer to one of two basic factual questions about the backgrounds of prominent candidates, compared to 37 percent of people aged 30 to 49, and half of those over age 50.³²

What remains true despite—or perhaps because of—this national attention deficit is that people continue to regard the news as ideologically biased in the ways described in Chapters 1 and 2. Americans at either end of the ideological spectrum are the most likely to see campaign coverage as biased. Conservative Republicans think the news favors the Democrats by a margin of 47 percent to 8 percent, and liberal Democrats think that campaign news favors the Republicans by a margin of 36 percent to 11 percent. The overwhelming majority (67 percent) still seek political information from sources that do not have a particular point of view, and just a quarter (25 percent) say they prefer news that matches their political point of view.³³

One conclusion about these trends is that most Americans lack the basic personal interest and orientation needed to help them think and act effectively. Perhaps this general lack of internal political bearings fuels the fruitless quest for unbiased information about politics, resulting in continuing confusion among those in

the middle and charges of bias from ideologues at both extremes. While people seek illusive general truths about politics, news marketers grow more desperate to attract the attention of viable consumer demographics. The result is news increasingly aimed at targeted audiences. Such news leaves many and sometimes most citizens out of the information equation. Perhaps that is the great irony of the American information system: whether it comes from politicians at the source or from content packaging at the point of transmission, information is increasingly aimed at small demographic groups, leaving increasingly large majorities out of the democratic conversation. The attention deficit syndrome is reinforced equally by the public, politicians, and news organizations as they struggle to make sense of politics in the marketplace of ideas.

NEWS AND PERSONAL EXPERIENCE: WHAT GETS THROUGH

As noted earlier, when people have direct experience with issues, whole new avenues of information and ways of thinking often open up. For example, someone who enjoys camping in the wilderness may subscribe to specialized publications promoting environmental awareness and begin thinking about how to join with others in various kinds of creative political action. Alternatively, someone who enjoys hunting in the wilderness may subscribe to other specialized publications to learn how to combat the environmentalists who wish to restrict the use of firearms in nature.

For the majority of people, however, most issues and events are encountered more through media exposure than through personal experience. In addition, people are busy with their personal lives and with the political issues in which they have a direct interest. Thus, it takes a great deal of information presented repeatedly in the media to get the attention of the average person.

To reduce this information processing to its simplest terms, we can say that after repeated exposure to an issue or problem, simple recognition sets in. If someone has a personal interest in the matter, he or she may next categorize, or frame, the object of attention to help keep it in focus and to begin thinking more clearly about it. After people have begun to form categories, they can place finer details and bits of information in the categories and begin to shade their thoughts and opinions. At this point, we can begin to say some things about how people process information from the news. Following the development of attention, interest, and some basic categorization schemes, people may pick up and evaluate news information in the following ways:

- Reacting to *cues* or labels (left, right; Republican, Democrat; hawk, dove; environmentalist, gun lover, terrorist, etc.).

- Assimilating factoids or bits of information that are often offered in support of the broad political cues and labels.
- Attending to emotions in news reports that motivate greater attention and learning.
- Fitting all this mediated information processing into the central organizing principles (values, interests, lifestyle choices) that make up the individual's personal life experiences.

In short, people tend to form their thinking about the big items repeated frequently in the news (major issues, candidates in elections, chronic social problems) using these general (intellectual) labor saving devices: cueing, factoid gathering, weighing positive and negative claims about those factoids, and finally, judging the information gathered against personal experiences. These commonly used information strategies provide a bridge in the debate about whether people think for themselves or whether the news does their thinking for them. The answer is that people creatively incorporate the cue and information structures of media representations (news, political advertising, editorials, punditry, etc.) into their personal thinking. Each individual develops a strategy for selecting (and tuning out) information about politics but relies as well on the common information pathways in order to make contact with the more general ideas and themes that we call public opinion. Thus, we are able to move from the individual to the public with this approach, reminding ourselves that it may be less important what individuals think in private than whether some part of that thinking can be linked meaningfully to public opinion. Consider how each of these information processing patterns operates.

Pattern 1: Taking Broad Interpretive Cues from the News

Most of us simplify busy lives by screening political information through familiar and trusted reference groups. We take cues from leaders, political parties, interest groups, and other familiar news sources who interpret (frame) news events and offer opinions that may guide thinking about a confusing world. In addition, stereotypes, slogans, and old-fashioned name calling can provide the basis for simplifying our thinking about otherwise complicated realities.

Research by political scientist John Zaller demonstrates that the more closely people follow an issue in the news, the more their opinions follow the cues offered by leaders of the political parties, recognized ideological groups, and other prominent political viewpoints.³⁴ This means, in effect, that the more informed people are about issues in the news, the more their opinions conform to those expressed by elites, government officials, interest groups, and parties.

Perhaps even more startling, these generalizations apply most strongly to more educated people, who tend to pay more attention to the news—the so-called informed public. Although this is an ironic way to think about being informed, it is less surprising when we recall that the information that goes into the news is largely provided by government officials and other prominent elites.

This does not mean that hearing one statement containing a familiar symbol or information source typically molds understanding of an issue. On the contrary, most

people live with a serious state of information overload. They tend not to pay much attention until an issue or event reaches saturation coverage and continues to make the news regularly for an extended period of time with prominent spokespersons taking increasingly clear and simple positions. Once this signal-to-noise ratio (recall the discussion from Chapter 4) becomes very high, people begin to accept the kinds of broad cues discussed earlier to help organize their thinking. Thus, the ability of the Bush administration to dominate the news leading up to the Iraq War and repeatedly link Iraq to weapons of mass destruction and terrorism led majorities of Americans to conclude that Iraq represented an immediate threat.

Pattern 2: Gathering Factoids

Even when people are knee-jerk liberals, conservatives, Republicans, Democrats, or Rush Limbaugh ditto heads, they tend to search for some supporting reasons to accept the cues they get from their favorite political references. This is where factoids come in, those bits and pieces of information that fill in emerging understandings of a situation. This is also where news management becomes crucial, with forces on both sides trying to keep a story going and to add elements that reinforce their preferred interpretations while countering those of the other side. For example, in political campaigns where the field of candidates narrows and media scrutiny becomes ever more intense, there is a daily battle in which each side tries to build up its own message while tearing down the images of the other side.

In the political trenches, the lines between news and advertising, information and propaganda, have become increasingly hard to draw. Media consultants often try to insert news and documentary-type images into TV ads while setting up news events with advertising values in mind. The synergy between news and advertising can be important in getting public attention and influencing opinions. When themes from advertising hit the news, they gain an important element of “facticity” (objectivity or legitimacy) that can break down resistance.

During the great health care reform battle of 1994, for example, groups in the health care, insurance, and pharmaceutical industries spent millions of dollars on advertising to create doubts about possible negative effects of the president's call for universal health care. A barrage of commercials sent emotional messages about rising costs, government bureaucracy, diminished quality of care, and long waits for treatment to the politically important middle-class audience (most of whom already had health insurance).

Among the most memorable ad campaigns were the “Harry and Louise” spots produced by the health insurance industry, whose member companies stood to lose a great deal from any plan that regulated their profits or required them to extend coverage to people with expensive health problems such as cancer or AIDS. The millions of dollars they spent on the slick Madison Avenue spots were minor compared to the billions that the big insurance companies had at stake in the reforms. Harry and Louise were depicted as a sympathetic middle-aged, middle-class couple of the sort that appears in TV series and other commercials. They worried about what they would lose under the proposed reforms, and each ad in the series introduced a new element of doubt about the leading plans, particularly the one championed by Hillary and Bill Clinton.

Meanwhile, behind the scenes the health care industry was spending widely on lobbying and campaign contributions to key members of Congress to pry their support away from the president's plan. Not surprisingly, the authoritative opposition voices from Congress that were heard in the news echoed the same elements of doubt raised in the advertising.³⁵ A public opinion one-two punch (as in patterns 1 and 2) had been set in motion.

On the other side, the Clinton forces ran their own ads to counter the daily attacks (including their own series of Harry and Louise commercials in which the couple is bedridden following a medical calamity, Harry loses his job and the health coverage it provides, and Louise turns against him). Through it all, both the Clintons and many members of the administration delivered speeches, appeared at rallies, and gave interviews with reporters to reinforce important bits of supporting information underlying their plan.

These opposing campaigns produced something of a draw in terms of public reactions. After more than a year of concerted news and advertising information blitzes, a strong majority of 74 percent favored the idea of universal coverage, a cornerstone of the Clinton plan.³⁶ At the same time, only 33 percent backed the Clinton plan, while 76 percent said they were unwilling to accept less choice in doctors or hospitals, and 74 percent believed that universal reform would lead to rationing.³⁷ Perhaps most telling of all was the discovery made by the White House polling team led by Stanley Greenberg that after all the sides had weighed in, the public actually understood less about the Clinton plan than they did at the time it was unveiled.

The moral of this story is that once the big information cues such as president and Congress, Republicans and Democrats, big government and small government, have structured the information picture (pattern 1), the fine details added daily in the news and advertising can make a big difference (pattern 2). As Robert Teeter, one of the gurus of the information and opinion management business, put it: "People don't decide based on some great revelation. They form their views based on thousands of little bits of information that shake out from television ads and news stories."³⁸

Pattern 3: Tuning in to Feelings and Emotions (Weighing the Positives and the Negatives)

The first two patterns of information processing are seldom enough to account for public reactions to news. In most cases, people would not even attend to stories if there were not some emotional hook or charge in them. It is not surprising in this light that the communication strategies employed by warring political factions can turn downright nasty. This often happens in election campaigns and big national policy battles. The emotions in the long-running national fight over abortion policy come to mind here.

Not only do advocates for a cause challenge factual claims and attack the character of opponents, but they frequently plant doubts that have little basis in fact. Indeed, when the battle rages for the emotions of the public, the question of what is true or relevant is often the least of considerations. The key concerns of strategic communication become, what gets people's attention, and then what creates or resolves doubts in

their thinking? Although media managers often have more freedom with advertising, they can obtain the greatest effects when the same messages cross over and become part of news stories.

This is not to suggest that emotions are bad or even less relevant than facts in their thinking about politics. To the contrary, research by George Marcus, Russell Neuman, and Michael MacKuen shows that, in many cases, some degree of emotional arousal must occur in order for people to pay attention to other kinds of information in a situation. In some cases, the emotional (or affective) information that people receive may be far more important for their thinking and acting than facts (or cognitions).³⁹ These important understandings also help explain why TV is more important than other media for most people.

However, the use of emotion in political communication is often not aimed at enhancing critical thought or judgment, and the reporting tendencies of the press do not always favor the citizen as much as they favor communication strategists bent on winning their immediate political battles. For example, given the tendencies of the press to indulge in feeding frenzies as described in Chapter 5, allegations and charges from one political camp can often turn into news nightmares for another. The failure to counter even the most scurrilous charge planted in the news can begin to gnaw at people and take root in their opinions, even if they try to ignore the dirt and concentrate on substantial information. All this explains one of the great puzzles of political communication: Negativity often works even though a large majority of the public claims that they hate negative communication and that they try to screen it out of their thinking.

An important word of caution is in order here: Negative communication does not always work. A classic case is the difference between the George Bush election campaigns of 1988 and 1992. Both were extremely negative campaigns, with conservative estimates of the negative message content running at 50 percent or more of Bush's ads and news statements and increasing to as much as 75 to 80 percent in the closing days.⁴⁰ Yet Bush won one of those campaigns quite handily and lost the other one quite convincingly. To simplify the reasons greatly, negative campaigning is successful in part if the opponent (or the victim, as it were) understands the importance of information pattern 2 and counters every bit of negative information with bits of information that deflect it, raise doubts about the other side, or refocus public attention on something else. Where Bush's 1988 opponent Michael Dukakis seemed to lack a strategic response to the negative attacks of 1988 (thus allowing them to sink in), Bill Clinton in 1992 developed a wink and a shrug that suggested that perhaps Mr. Bush's use of negative tactics meant that he was a bit desperate.

In short, when people encounter negative information that goes uncountered, they tend to incorporate the negativity into their thinking even if, consciously, they try to avoid it. In the view of opinion experts Barbara Farah and Ethel Klein, people make the best sense they can of the information they have available to them, even when that information is negative, of questionable reliability, or generally distasteful.⁴¹

Pattern 4: Individuals Judge New Information Against their Personal Experiences

A popular school of thought about citizen information-processing suggests that people are lazy information processors or cognitive misers.⁴² Citizens rely mainly on gut feelings, personal experience, and their immediate life circumstances to screen information and reach judgments about politics. In this view, much information from the outer world is discounted simply because it does not dent this shell of personal experience. Thus people take shortcuts in processing information and arrive at judgments about politics that have been described by political scientist Samuel Popkin as “low information rationality.”⁴³ Such experienced-based reasoning about politics explains why people cannot remember many facts about particular stories in the news, yet draw cues, supporting factoids, and feelings from news coverage as the basis for judgments that often turn out to be fairly stable and meaningful.

Charting the terms of public engagement reminds us that beneath the rough indicators and simple judgments recorded in opinion polls are meanings that people construct in the process of arriving at their opinions on issues. These important areas of personal meaning remind us that for individuals in society, the news may be about things that go well beyond just making judgments that feed into elections or policy debates on various issues. The news also contains information that matters for people as they make various personal choices, live their lives, and adjust their emotions through the often turbulent flow of daily events in a complex world.

USES AND GRATIFICATIONS: OTHER REASONS PEOPLE FOLLOW THE NEWS

Thus far we have viewed news information in its most obvious democratic context: People follow the news to gather information that may help them in thinking about politics, forming opinions, and taking more effective political action. However, as noted earlier and illustrated in the case study, there are clearly other reasons people follow the news:

- *Curiosity and surveillance*: scanning for information that may be useful in everyday life (news of airline fare wars, weather forecasts, inflation reports, home mortgage rates).
- *Entertainment and escape*: following interesting dramas that develop around crime stories (O. J. Simpson) and political scandals. For example, were members of the Bush administration too cozy with Enron officials like CEO Kenneth Lay to whom the President referred as “Kenny Boy”? In other words, people can simply enjoy the spectacle of politics.
- *Social and psychological adjustment*: keeping contact with society and our own places in it (How is my world and where do I stand in it?).

As explained in Chapters 1 and 3, news organizations understand that people have much broader uses for the news and adjust their coverage accordingly. As popular tastes and interests shift, the news generally follows, creating tensions with the democratic ideal of citizen-friendly news information. Critics argue that such pander-

ing to base public tastes only fuels the spiral of declining news values. Others counter that people will select and convert information to their own uses regardless of the standards that news or entertainment organizations attempt to maintain. For example, studies of popular American television programs in other countries show that viewers often find meanings that American audiences are far less likely to support, including confirmation of some rather nasty beliefs about greed, violence, corruption, and other images of life in the United States.⁴⁴

A great deal of research has been conducted on the so-called uses and gratifications of news and entertainment programming. Most recently, the focus has been placed on highly personalized decodings of media content.⁴⁵ However, for purposes of illustrating the idea that news attracts attention for a variety of reasons, it is helpful to think about some broad alternative uses of the news that many people share in common. Traditional research on the various uses and gratifications associated with the news can be summarized under the three broad categories just listed.⁴⁶ It is important to see these activities as part of an extended notion of media politics, in the sense that people drawn by whatever reason to follow news stories may engage in ways that lead to meaningful new understandings of the political world or their places in it. Because all these uses and gratifications can have important personal and political consequences, they are worth exploring in more detail.

Curiosity and Surveillance

People are blessed with curiosity, which can be a source of sheer pleasure or amusement as well as a means of spotting new information that might be useful in coping with everyday reality. Research has shown that human curiosity is piqued by things (e.g., situations, ideas, scenery, films, art, and news) that contain a mixture of familiar and novel stimuli and features.⁴⁷ On the one hand, repeated exposure to completely familiar stimuli results in the formation of subconscious mental “scripts” that make it possible to respond to situations without really thinking about them.⁴⁸ Curiosity and attention are minimized in such scripted situations. On the other hand, stimuli that are completely foreign may be so dissonant and hard to assimilate that people tend to ignore, avoid, or misinterpret them.⁴⁹

Even though the political messages in the news are fairly predictable, the events, plots, and characters are constantly changing. Human curiosity is engaged by new events and novel twists on old themes. Moreover, some of the events in the news may have an impact on the people who follow them. Thus, many people find it useful to scan the news just to keep potentially important events under surveillance. News is the perfect blend of the familiar and the novel. There is an intrinsic satisfaction in seeing how a familiar theme will develop in a new plot or whether an old plot will develop a new twist. For example, how will freedom of choice—a theme familiar to every American—be adapted to fit such contexts as abortion, drug use, pornography, or the regulation of cigarette smoking in public places? As long as new events keep happening in the world, people will be drawn to the news as a means of applying, testing, and adjusting their understandings about reality.

However, the news may satisfy our curiosity too easily when familiar political scripts confirm popular beliefs and stereotypes that people have scripted into their

own thinking. For example, if the news persists in portraying the problems of the Third World in terms of the virtues of development versus the stigma of underdevelopment, the news audience may fail to perceive many of the problems caused by rapid economic development in Third World societies—problems such as the destruction of culture, the growing dependence of poor countries on the economies of rich countries, and the corruption that often accompanies economic growth in repressive regimes. All these problems contribute to the political and economic instability of those Third World countries that have entered the seemingly endless process of development. Despite its limitations, the development metaphor is written into each chapter of the development saga by government officials and the reporters who cover them. It becomes easy for people to tune out such familiar stories in the news when little new information is presented in ways that shake familiar plots.

Indeed, the refocusing of attention on growing inequalities between northern and southern nations lies at the heart of the rising global protest movement, which has staged demonstrations in cities around the world where trade and development agencies hold their meetings. Other activists have turned the brand images against the corporations that created them by cleverly waging *logo campaigns* against corporations such as McDonald's, Nike, and Coca Cola to bring news attention to global problems involving environmental change, labor abuses, and human rights.

The news is often the most satisfying when it contains periodic information that is directly relevant to people. The reactions to such reporting differ in two interesting ways, from reactions to more abstract stories. First, people are more likely to think in action-oriented terms about personally relevant stories. The more distant world of political news often leaves people with little option but to exercise their beliefs in a purely private fashion. Second, people express much less confusion and displeasure about news stories that satisfy curiosity with information than can be applied to their immediate concerns. Consider, for example, some typical reactions, in a survey conducted by the author, to a report on the financial troubles faced by four major airlines. The report outlined the various consequences for travelers, employees, and the economy if the airlines went bankrupt. Such information would seem to be relevant to a broad range of people. In fact, everyone in the sample of 375 respondents who chose to discuss the report found some personal use for the information. The range of uses was quite broad. For example, some people were alerted to possible difficulties in future travel arrangements, as indicated by this reaction: "I was disturbed by the fact that the failure of several airlines could result in increased inconvenience in travel." People who had already made travel plans were moved by the report to take direct action, as this response explains: "I found the story disturbing, as I have plane reservations in the spring with one of the airlines that may go bankrupt, so I plan to check with my travel agent about possibly changing airlines." Others found even more intimate applications for the information in the story, as revealed in these reactions: "I found the story disturbing, as I have a friend that's been employed for several years by another of the airlines mentioned," and it is "reassuring that I am employed by an airline that is doing very well. The loss is our gain." It is significant that the airline story did not lead anyone to question its relevance or newsworthiness.

Political surveillance also goes on in many long-running political news stories. Consider the Clinton impeachment scandal in this context. Curiosity and surveillance help explain shifts in opinion on such issues as whether Clinton lied about his affair with Lewinsky, and, if he did, how that should affect his impeachment. This indicates that even when people have formed opinions on something, they may continue to monitor the news to see if new information either confirms or challenges their judgments.

Entertainment and Escape

The news may represent itself as fact, but as illustrated in Chapters 2 and 3, it is communicated to the public with all the trappings of fiction: short, intense scenes; literary rather than analytical treatments; the nearly uniform use of the story format; and the emphasis on drama, emotional conflict, and larger-than-life characters. The news may portray real events, but this portrayal often discourages analytical or instrumental uses for the information it presents. This result is not an inevitable property of narratives, which can, if presented in the right ways, actually provoke thoughtful reflection and action. Indeed, some news narratives appear to have this critical potential, as when people are engaged in sustained and important national deliberations.

Most stories in the news do not go on long enough, however, nor do they contain angles that people identify deeply enough with, to stimulate much thought or critical action. It is, in these cases, easy to become engaged by the sheer drama of news events. The news makes everyday happenings seem larger than life. Most news reports invite us to escape for a minute or two into a world filled with pathos, tragedy, moral lessons, crisis, mystery, danger, and occasional whimsy. The escape into this dramatic world is made all the easier when the happenings involve people like us or people about whom we have strong positive or negative feelings.

Each day's news menu offers a large supply of complete minidramas for our entertainment pleasure. We can step into one fascinating fantasy for a minute or two—experiencing a brief sense of other lives and other worlds—and then move on to the next one. One moment we are a member of a guerilla band on maneuvers in a far-off war, the next we move in with the survivors of an earthquake, and then suddenly we are transported into the nightmare of a bank robbery and murder captured on the closed-circuit video system. At last, the string of high-tension episodes is broken by a commercial that gives us a chance to regain our bearings, grab a snack, and get ready for the next installment of our evening's journey into real-life adventure.

Vicarious involvement in the news is often even more compelling than more conventional forms of escape via drama and literature. News dramas, after all, are represented as real, serious, important, and worthy of everyone's attention. Fiction, by contrast, does not involve real spies, real robbers, or real earthquakes. Fiction can at times command our attention, but it seldom combines intensity, universality of appeal, and realism the way the news does. A best-selling novel may sell a million copies during its lengthy run on the best-seller list, whereas most everyone in the nation may be riveted by the news on a single day such as 9/11.

The seriousness or realism of the news is, paradoxically, a key to understanding its power as an escape medium. The general acceptance of the news as factual, important, and objective makes it easy for people to give themselves over to serious involvement with it. Having done this, the individual is swept away by images and ideas that are often both stranger and more dramatic than fiction. For example, few novels contain plot twists like the ones in the news story about a band of thieves posing as police officers who were forced by circumstances to try to arrest a group of policemen disguised as a gang of thieves. The real police were—you guessed it—on the trail of the thieves who were posing as police. If a novelist were to submit such a plot to a publisher, it would probably be rejected as incredible or unrealistic. When it becomes news, however, no plot is too incredible to be engrossing. All plots are credible precisely because they are news. Thus the issue of credibility or realism, a major obstacle to people becoming involved in fiction, is transcended easily by stories in the news, no matter how bizarre they may be. The fact that news stories are thought to represent real situations adds to their entertainment value in at least one other respect. When dramatic incidents involve real people—people who feel, suffer, think, and die—this creates a direct bond of human sensibility with the audience. Whereas fiction writers struggle to create such bonds through words and imaginary actions, the news generates them routinely by simply recording dramatic excerpts from real lives. Thus few novels or movies about the horrors of war can rival the routine nightly installments on the Vietnam War that Americans witnessed between 1965 and 1970. Fictional accounts of political power and intrigue may achieve a measure of credibility, but few can match the daily revelations about power and corruption in the White House that filled the news at the time of the Watergate scandal. The unfolding horrors of 9/11 will forever be etched in the minds of those who witnessed them.

In fact, the news is so dramatic that it increasingly supplies the plot material for novels, films, and new entertainment forms like the docudrama. Novels have been written about murders, robberies, hijackings, and kidnappings, subjects that first captured the popular imagination in the news. Journalistic treatments of terrorism, political corruption, military operations, and spy escapades have spawned movies by the score. Even the activity of journalism has inspired entertainment fare, as in the case of Woodward and Bernstein's book and film versions of *All the President's Men*—a highly dramatized account of how the two daring reporters conducted their famous Watergate investigation. Nowadays, the people who often arrive at the scene of a news event after the reporters are book agents and movie deal-makers. Such a trend only enhances the news as an escape medium and further undermines its potential to inform us realistically about contemporary life. One observer of this trend of life-based reality dramas dominating entertainment media called his book *Life: The Movie*.⁵⁰

As Walter Lippmann pointed out many years ago, the world of politics, as viewed by the public, will always be somewhat dramatized and fictionalized.⁵¹ Politicians who control the flow of information will attempt whenever possible to shape news to their advantage. However, when the media actively seek dramatized reality to feed to a receptive audience, the only check on the representation of political reality is removed. *When politicians, press, and public all judge political performances more in terms of dramatic criteria than moral standards, the conscience of the polity is lost.*

In the world of political drama, the performance may count more than the success or failure of action because, in many cases, the performance *is* the action as far as the public is concerned. Consider some other cases of actions that were either made or broken by the quality of the surrounding dramatic performances. When John Kennedy admitted to botching the Bay of Pigs invasion, a majority of Americans forgave him on the strength of his compassionate and convincing apology. Yet when Jimmy Carter took responsibility for the aborted attempt to rescue the American hostages from Iran, his popularity plunged. Carter, unlike Kennedy, had failed to script a dramatic performance that fit his role properly into the surrounding adventure saga. In short, Carter gave a bad performance. When Richard Nixon was a candidate for vice president in 1952, he faced the nation on television to address charges of political corruption. He won millions of voters' hearts with his careful script, his calculated stage setting, the fine supporting role of his faithful wife, and his emotionally delivered reference to his innocent little dog, Checkers. By contrast, when Nixon again faced corruption charges over two decades later, his performance was flawed, petulant, personal, and poorly rehearsed. He failed to produce the all-encompassing script and well-rehearsed supporting cast that might have represented some salvation from the otherwise tawdry reality of the Watergate affair.

In many ways, Bill Clinton's every appearance during the Lewinsky scandal was subject to the public's critical judgment about both his character and his ability to stay in character. The steady stream of jokes from late-night comedians (that were often recycled the next day at the office, in computer chat rooms, and in e-mail) can be thought of as part of the national play of politics. Like most play, political play is both entertaining and serious.

Even though Bill Clinton was the one on trial, both in the court of public opinion and in the Senate, the news and talk about the scandal also focused playful attention on its colorful cast of characters. Monica Lewinsky was not alone in becoming a household name; she was joined, most notably, by Kenneth Starr and Linda Tripp—a trio of characters whose motivations the public viewed dimly. In August 1998, Gallup observed that “both Monica Lewinsky and Ken Starr have extremely low personal ratings, which continue to decline. When she first emerged into public view in January 30 percent of Americans had a favorable view of Lewinsky and 50 percent an unfavorable one. Today only 13 percent feel favorably toward the former intern, and 72 percent unfavorably.” Gallup also noted that “Throughout the year roughly one-quarter of Americans have had a favorable view of Ken Starr, but his unfavorable rating has grown from 24 percent in January to 54 percent today.”⁵²

In this company, Clinton fared rather well. As Gallup reported in March 1998, “Clinton's favorability rating . . . is well over twice as high as those of the other major participants in the developments of the last eight weeks, including [Kathleen] Willey, Lewinsky, [Paula] Jones and Special Prosecutor Kenneth Starr.”⁵³ Clinton may have been buoyed not only by a general sense that everyone close to the scandal became tarnished by it, but also by the public's belief that the motives of these other characters were far from pure. Indeed, it is hard to discount the social importance of the discussions that went on about such matters as why Starr, the self-styled Puritan,

released a report filled with pornographic material, or what kind of friend was Linda Tripp pretending to be as she bugged her intimate conversations with Monica?

If the dramatization of political reality is a key to understanding the fortunes of public life, it is no less important for understanding the private political worlds of individual citizens. Vicarious political experience may be different from direct participation, but it is nonetheless a valid form of experience. As a result, escape and entertainment are far from being meaningless pursuits. Whatever their other effects may be, political dramas can help people open up their fantasies and subconscious feelings, assisting them in easing psychological tensions and social strains. The escape and entertainment functions of the news thus pave the way for important social and psychological adjustments.

Social and Psychological Adjustment

When people escape into the world of drama found in the news, they do not necessarily leave all their concerns behind them. Although our inclinations for direct action may be inhibited by the one-way communication channels of the mass media, we respond psychologically to the people and issues in news reports. It is, in fact, remarkably easy to identify with actors in the news, respond to them emotionally, and imagine that we are somehow part of their experiences. In a fascinating discussion of the rise of nations, political scientist Benedict Anderson argues that, to an important degree, the society of strangers beyond our daily, face-to-face worlds is a product of imagination fueled by the media.⁵⁴

Human beings spend a good deal of both their waking and sleeping time creating imaginary scenarios in which they explore wishes, hopes, fears, and desires. Through fantasies, we can rehearse unfamiliar social roles and anticipate encounters with other people. Fantasies also enable us to contain powerful feelings like anger, sexual desire, or fear when it is inappropriate to express them openly in a particular situation. In other situations, fantasies help in making choices about how best to express those feelings in public.

A healthy fantasy life is essential for adjusting to the conditions and people we encounter in real life. The news, with its powerful images, emotional themes, and colorful characters, is a rich source of fantasy material. One can step into a news plot and imagine what it would be like to be rich, poor, powerful, weak, female, male, sexy, brave, or intelligent. By taking the real world into the privacy of our minds via the news, we can explore feelings and relate to people in ways that might not be comfortable or possible in real life.

The emphasis on drama, emotional themes, powerful images, and strong personalities makes the news a convenient medium for working out psychological tensions and social conflicts. People do not even have to leave their living rooms in order to encounter real people about whom they have strong feelings and issues that seem to affect their well-being. In their encounters with this imaginary society, people can form impressions of their community, their nation, and their places in them. By making connections between personal concerns and events and personalities in the news, people can express feelings and think about their problems in uninhibited and often satis-

fyng ways. This vicarious resolution of social and psychological strains is all the more effective because the realities of news stories are usually too distant for people to experience directly—thus the feelings and understandings people develop in response to the news are seldom subjected to reality testing.

Fantasies require very little anchor in reality in order to thrive. In fact, because fantasies involve by definition the suspension of ordinary reality, they can spring from the barest of suggestions and the least substantial of images. As far as our fantasy life goes, what does it matter what our favorite newscaster is really like in private life? As long as he or she displays the right style, manner, or looks, we feel comfortable inviting him or her into our home and listening as we would to a trusted friend imparting all the news that has transpired since our last meeting.

Because fantasies feed on such minimal information, and because the news transmits such condensed, ambiguous images, it should not be surprising to learn that people generate very different fantasies from the same story. Who knows what it is really like to be the guerilla fighter dashing through the jungle, locked in a life-or-death struggle for the freedom of her country? Some might imagine that she is a romantic figure, with the virtues of bravery, charisma, morals, and intelligence—the sort of person they would secretly like to be. Others might imagine her as a bloodthirsty heathen—an immoral foe who threatens their values and lifestyles. Same news story, different fantasies.

Part of the fantasy element in the news is caused by the heavy emphasis in politics on fantasy themes of power, community, order, and security.⁵⁵ Such concerns are central to the social and emotional well-being of the average person. A political speech without an emphasis on power, community, order, or security would be an atypical and in all likelihood ineffectual statement. These fantasy themes of politics are transmitted from political performances to the mass audiences by the news. In fact, mass media journalism tends to focus on fantasy themes, which represent the most dramatic and universally appealing components of political performances. Fantasy themes are about the only medium through which a lengthy political performance can be condensed into a meaningful news-length capsule.

Consider, as an example, television news coverage of a presidential inauguration. High rituals of state such as inaugurations, campaigns, funerals, and State of the Union addresses are good vantage points for viewing fantasy themes in action. These rituals are designed to appeal to the popular imagination with images of strength, community, security, and new beginnings. Inaugurations are always occasions for bringing people together, reminding them that they are one nation with common bonds, and calling for renewed commitment to the goals of prosperity, harmony, peace, and security. Because most people are concerned at some level with prosperity, harmony, peace, and security, it is comforting to have related fantasies evoked time and again by each new leader chosen to preserve and protect these elements of the American fantasy, more commonly referred to as the American dream. Inaugural speeches are open invitations for new presidents to pull out all the symbolic stops in an effort to kindle the deepest fantasies that define the political community.

Ronald Reagan was faced with a challenge when he mounted the platform to address the nation in 1980. The country was plunging into recession, national pride was

at an ebb, and people saw a future with little promise. Drawing on the themes that got him elected, Reagan exhorted the country to step back into the past as a means of finding the values and spirit with which to face the future. He chose the perfect setting for such a speech. Standing at the West Front of the Capitol, Reagan pointed to the great gallery of national monuments in Washington, D.C. As he mentioned great heroes and episodes from the nation's past, he could evoke their physical presence by indicating those shrines. Mentioning George Washington is one thing, but presenting the dramatic image of the Washington Monument and its stunning reflecting pool is an even more effective way to engage the imagination of the audience.

In order to realize the full potential of the images in his speech, Reagan needed a little help from the media. He could, of course, talk about the great monuments and symbols of state that surrounded him, but how much more effective it would be if the media incorporated pictures of those things as though they were part of the script for the performance. Reagan and his media advisers must have anticipated what the journalists would do. All the White House needed to do was announce the time and place of the performance and issue an advance copy of the script, and the media could be relied on to do the rest. As the following excerpt from Ernest Bormann's analysis of inaugural coverage by CBS television indicates, journalist and political actor joined forces smoothly to maximize the fantasy potential in the event:

Toward the close of the speech Reagan noted that this was the first time the ceremony was held on the West Front of the capitol, then he said, "Standing here, one faces a magnificent vista (The director called up a long shot of the magnificent vista), opening up on this city's special beauty and history. At the end of this open mall (The director had the camera pan up the open mall) are those shrines to the giants on whose shoulders we stand. Directly in front of me, the monument to a monumental man: (Cut to a shot of Washington monument) George Washington, father of our country. . . ." After an encomium to Washington, Reagan said, "Off to one side (Cut to a shot of the Jefferson Memorial), the stately memorial to Thomas Jefferson." After some words of praise for Jefferson, Reagan continued, "and then beyond the reflecting pool, the dignified columns of the Lincoln Memorial (Camera moves to Lincoln Memorial)." When Reagan next directed his audience's attention to the "sloping hills of Arlington National Cemetery with its row upon row of simple white markers bearing crosses or Stars of David. . ." the director had the camera focus on the Cemetery.⁵⁶

With this kind of interplay between political images and news emphasis, it is little wonder that news provides a rich source of fantasy. Two characteristics of such fantasy play are the formation of strong expressions of feeling and opinion (stronger than would ordinarily be acceptable in real-life situations) and the development of vicarious relationships with the actors in news stories. Communication theorists have used the term *parasocial relationship* to refer to the often intimate emotional bonds that people can establish with the distant actors on the other end of one-way mass media relationships.⁵⁷

It is also worth considering that the Clinton scandal engaged people at deeply personal levels involving not just drama and entertainment but also emotions and so-

cial identities. For example, the social and emotional dimensions of the scandal may be found in the striking divide in reactions of lower and higher income groups. Pew Center surveys show a generally negative relationship between the income level of respondents and their approval of Clinton as president: Low-income groups were more likely to approve of Clinton's performance in office and less likely to think he should be impeached. For example, Clinton's August 1998 approval ratings ranged from 59 percent among the highest income groups to 69 percent among the lowest.

Is this just economic self-interest at work? Perhaps low-income groups believed they had economically benefited from Clinton's policies and supported Clinton while discounting the Lewinsky spectacle. Another related explanation might be that these differences among income groups merely echo the effects of political partisanship. Economic gains and some interaction with party loyalty may well be at work here, but there is still strong evidence that different social and economic groups felt very differently about how they separated their support for the job Clinton was doing as president from their feelings about Clinton as a person. Pew asked respondents to choose among the following statements: "I like Bill Clinton personally and I like his policies"; "I don't like Bill Clinton personally but I like his policies"; and "I don't like Bill Clinton personally and I don't like his policies." Here again, sharp differences were clear among income groups. Whereas only 19 percent of the highest-income group and 24 percent of the next-highest group agreed that they liked Bill Clinton personally and liked his policies, 43 and 47 percent of the two lowest-income groups agreed. In contrast, 76 percent of all respondents earning more than \$50,000 said they disliked Clinton personally compared with 53 percent of those earning between \$20,000 and \$30,000 and 44 percent of those earning less than \$20,000.

These findings suggest that approval of Clinton was strongly associated with different income groups' assessments of Clinton as a person. Thus, for many lower-income Americans, Bill Clinton appears to have represented something of a sympathetic character despite the sexual scandal. He is, after all, a child of a lower-class background, and he used that fact quite publicly to build his image as "The Man From Hope." Clinton's symbolic profile as a poor child who rose to the White House perhaps matters more to poorer Americans than does his sexual behavior, or perhaps his sexual behavior seems less inconsistent with that group's expectations of how presidents should act. Poorer Americans, therefore, apparently reacted to the Lewinsky scandal in part based on their symbolic understanding of Clinton-as-a-person, signaling not just policy differences among income groups but their different emotional constructions of the narrative itself.⁵⁸

Such reactions to people and issues in political reporting can be important for emotional adjustment and maintaining a sense of emotional belonging in a vast and often conflicted society. Whereas people often feel pressure not to express their true feelings in real-life settings, they can rail against injustice and political folly through private interactions with the media. A range of clear-cut, simplified, and easily accessible social ties and antagonisms is displayed on a daily basis in the news. The social and emotional adjustment functions served by media politics may be more satisfying than the corresponding outlets for emotional expression and social bonding in everyday life.

THE FUTURE: CITIZENS, INFORMATION, AND POLITICS

The ways in which people engage with news suggests a complex picture of political communication. On the one hand, when issues saturate the news and entertainment media, as have topics as disparate as abortion politics and the Clinton scandals, people may engage at deep levels. However, it is not always clear that this engagement translates into obvious effects on public policies.

The temptation always exists for political actors to propose magical solutions and fantastic political scenarios through the use of myths, stereotypes, scapegoats, and other symbolic devices. When the media tell such stories because they fit the news values that organizations are looking for, there are few restraints on the fabrication of political reality. Under such circumstances, political actors can manage issues, conflicts, and crises by simply throwing symbols at them—symbols that may be irrelevant to the matters at hand yet provoke powerful emotional responses from the public.

Hope for escaping this information confinement of political illusion and social isolation is provided by the research introduced earlier showing that people can be skeptical and reach their own interpretations. However, in the current news system, people all too often reach the conclusion that they have been deceived by politicians and government. Still, as William Gamson notes, there is evidence that when people tap into personal experiences with political issues, they can begin to identify with others who have common experiences and think in terms of political actions that might make a difference.⁵⁹ Moreover, as noted earlier, news that points to citizen action alternatives also stimulates greater citizen interest and makes information easier to store and use. Together, these two ideas send a message to journalists to cover more of the experiences that ordinary citizens have with the issues that make the news and to surround those experiences with information about the political options available to concerned citizens.

If young people are to return to politics, the new interactive media will have to offer richer visual and participatory information formats. It would also help, of course, if political leaders spoke to young citizens. Most electoral and issue campaigns offer few messages to young citizens, either because they are thought to be hard to reach, or because they are regarded as so tuned out that their participation will not have much impact, or both. While mainstream politics and news largely ignores the youth audience, many young people are finding alternative channels of information and action. The global social justice movement of recent years indicates greater interest among young activists than at any time perhaps since the 1960s. Yet without some connection to more traditional political participation such as voting, or to broader information channels such as mass media news, it is unclear how this movement will grow in public support or how it will affect government policies.

Will news organizations change their patterns of coverage voluntarily? Perhaps not. Because we are talking about an information system, it makes more sense to think about related changes that might occur in all three areas of press, government communication practices, and citizen information use. The next chapter addresses changes

that would bring each set of actors in the system closer to constructing the kind of information order that would serve the needs of contemporary democracy.

NOTES

1. Roderick Hart, *Seducing America: How Television Charms the Modern Voter* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 22.
2. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 36.
3. See James T. Hamilton, *All the News That's Fit to Sell: How the Market Transforms Information into News* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), Chapter 3.
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58. These conclusions and the data in this section are from Lawrence, Bennett, and Hunt, "Making Sense of Monica."
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