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Political Communication —Old and New Media Relationships

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This article reflects upon the ways television changed the political landscape and considers how far new media, such as the Internet, are displacing television or reconfiguring the political communications ecology. The analysis explores opportunities and challenges facing media producers, politicians, and citizens. The authors conclude by suggesting that the television-politics relationship that emerged in the 1960s still prevails to some extent in the digital era but faces new pressures that weaken the primacy of the broadcast-centered model of political communication. The authors identify five new features of political communication that present formidable challenges for media policy makers. They suggest that these are best addressed through an imaginative, democratic approach to nurturing the emancipatory potential of the new media ecology by carving out within it a trusted online space where the dispersed energies, self-articulations, and aspirations of citizens can be rehearsed, in public, within a process of ongoing feedback to the various levels and centers of governance.

Keywords: new media; television; politics; democracy; Internet

From the earliest days of television research, the new medium was regarded as having potential to contribute to a more informed, inclusive, and nonpartisan democracy. John Scupham, the BBC's first controller of educational broadcasting, writing in 1967, argued that "radio and television have shifted the emphasis of political controversy in the democratic countries from abuse to argument" (p. 136). Blumler declared in 1970 that television "conveys impressions of the world of politics to individuals whose access to serious coverage of current affairs is otherwise quite limited" and could "promote the development of more effective patterns of citizenship" (p. 100). In his 1972 manifesto for television as a vehicle for participatory democracy, Brian

Groombridge suggested that the medium could "be considered as candidate for a major part in the civilising of our arid communal existence and in the improvement and enlivenment of our democracy, such that more people have the opportunity, the aptitude, the incentive, and the desire to play an active personal part in what is with unconscious irony called 'public life'" (p. 25). These were not merely speculative assessments. Early studies on the effects of televised election coverage (Trenaman and McQuail 1961; Blumler and McQuail 1968) showed quite clearly that through exposure to political broadcasts, voters (including initially less informed ones) acquired significant information about campaign issues and policy proposals.

But as the new medium became settled, ubiquitous, and seemingly invulnerable, it came to seem as if politics in electoral democracies—a game of power, persuasion, mobilizing support for policies and politicians, and aggregating votes—could not take place without or beyond the mediating gaze of television. Thus, television and politics became indeed complementary institutions, existing in a state of mutual dependence. Politics provided the raw materials and television packaged it, subtly reconstructed it, and delivered it to audiences. The rules of the journalistic game precluded any major repackaging of political messages and hence allowed the political sources fairly wide latitude if not full control of their messages. But over time, the rules of the game began to gradually shift. A series of historical events (e.g., the Vietnam War, Watergate) as well as political and technological changes moved television reporters, editors, and executives to adopt more skeptical, less deferential, and often more adversarial stances toward politics and politicians and hence a more actively interventionist role in the presentation of political issues and stories. The balance of power between the two began to shift gradually toward a more even situation.

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The changing rules of the game had some significant consequences, both for the political players as well as for the terrain of television's coverage of politics. It thus had several long-range effects on the political processes and their outcomes. First, television moved into the center of the political stage, assuming a "coproducer" role of political messages instead of the earlier journalistically sanctioned "reporter" role, that is, that of transmitting and relating political events to the audience as if from outside the events. Television gradually moved from the role of observer of events and provider of accounts (stories) and emerged as definer and constructor of political reality. Without necessarily breaching journalistic norms, television came to have an impact upon the events it covered.

Second, while television became an integral part of the political process, it ironically contributed to its depoliticization. The accusation that television has shifted the focus of the political discourse from issues to personalities is by now quite familiar. Policy issues and concerns are more often associated with the faces of political leaders rather than with their political, ideological, and philosophical underpinnings. The educational value of election campaigns, which was once regarded as a key benefit of televised politics, was allegedly diminished by this focus on spectacle rather than ideas. It is, perhaps, an inevitable product of the visual character of the medium, in which faces are more easily recognizable by and accessible to mass audiences than abstract arguments about policies. The democratic ideal of conducting election campaigns as platforms for national debates, as an opportunity for societies to discuss their present and future directions (and indeed to examine their past), has been replaced by the familiar notion of the campaign as a horse race or political beauty contest.

Third, television transferred politics to the living room. Since, by definition, politics takes place in the public domain, involving societies in discussions, negotiations, and struggles over public issues and concerns, its natural locus must be in the public arena. Yet, television imported it into the living room and turned it into a parlor game played by small and quasi-intimate circles. The societal aspect of politics was thus diminished and the bonding effects of public debates attenuated. The public/private, outdoor/indoor dualities of the conduct of politics had ironically contradictory consequences. On one hand, by bringing politics into the home, television undoubtedly contributed to the expansion of the audience for politics. It incorporated into the political process individuals and groups in society that in pretelevision times did not regard themselves as participants in the political process, since their exposure to it was at best minimal and marginal. At the same time, the multiplication of television and other media outlets offering diverse contents has allowed viewers to escape from political content into a vast range of diversionary offerings.

Next, while changes in the scope and composition of television audiences require further documentation, the conventional wisdom is that one of the effects of television's forays into politics has been a dilution of the level of partisanship among audience members. The argument hinges on the assumption that changes in the formats of political television, first among them the introduction of televised debates between political leaders, have limited the ability of viewers

to exercise selective exposure to political messages. The familiar format of side-by-side presentation of partisan positions, designed, among other things, to display and preserve the medium's claim for balance and impartiality, resulted in "forced exposure" of viewers to both sides (occasionally three or more sides) of political arguments.

Finally, television's entry into the political domain inevitably led to the formation of professional cadres working for the political parties, designed to fashion the parties' messages and the public personae of political actors in ways that are compatible with the medium. Thus, the communicative activities on both sides of the political-media relationship were handed over and conducted by professionals working within and deploying the same set of professional journalistic practices. The professionalization of politics thus constitutes a response and an adaptation to the challenges of professionalized political media.

New Media: Displacement or Reconfiguration?

Does "the end of television" as we know it imply that the intimate relationship between television and politics that has dominated the past half century is fading away? There are some indications that this might indeed be the case.

The most significant change has been the encroachment of the Internet on the terrain hitherto dominated by television. Audiences for television, as well as for other mass media, are on a downward trend. Newspapers are losing readers and the main television outlets are losing viewers. While this is the case for mass media use generally, it is strikingly visible in the figures for audiences relying on television for political news. According to research conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project (Pew 2008), the number of Americans citing the Internet as their first source of presidential election campaign news has increased by 23 percent since 2004, while at the same time the number relying on television has declined by 4 percent (see table 1).

The Pew researchers note that "while mainstream news sources still dominate the online news and information gathering by campaign internet users, a majority of them now get political material from blogs, comedy sites, government websites, candidate sites or alternative sites." Moreover, the survey data show that younger people are more heavily represented among new media users, suggesting that the trend will accelerate (Pew 2008).

Rather than seeing these changes as a process of displacement, with new, digital media becoming dominant as analogue, print-broadcast media atrophy, they may be interpreted as evidence of an ecological reconfiguration, recasting roles and relationships within an evolving media landscape. As citizens gain access to inexpensive communication technologies through which they can interact with the media, generate their own content, and create alternative networks of information dissemination, the gate-keeping monopoly once enjoyed by editors and broadcasters is waning. While never merely passive recipients of television's account of political reality, audiences are increasingly becoming

TABLE 1
PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN NEWS: INTERNET
BOOM IN 2008 (IN PERCENTAGES)

First or Second Mention	October 2004	October 2008[a]	2004 to 2008 Change
Television	76	72	−4
Internet	10	33	+23
Newspapers	28	29	+1
Radio	15	21	+6
Magazines	2	3	+1
Other	3	2	−1
Don't know	2	1	−1

SOURCE: Pew (2008).
NOTE: Figures add to more than 100 percent because multiple responses were allowed.
a. Based on combined surveys conducted October 17-20 and October 24-27, 2004.

active participants in public communication, as senders as well as addressees of mass-circulating messages. This profound role change is taking place alongside the continued presence of professional media production aimed at traditional mass audiences. But everywhere, from interactive news Web sites that receive tens of thousands of comments from the public each day to YouTube videos challenging government policy, it is apparent that media producers can no longer expect to operate within an exclusive, professionalized enclave. Media audiences are now able to intervene in political stories with a degree of effectiveness that would have been unthinkable ten or twenty years ago.

Politicians have also become aware of these altered roles and, ever sensitive to shifts in their audiences' media use, have adapted the channels of their message delivery to connect with Internet users wherever they may surf. Already twenty or so years ago, political operatives attempted to reach voters directly by mailing video cassettes containing political messages, thus attempting to supersede the mediation of television. Now they see the Internet as offering a new way of detouring the mass media. In the United States, Barack Obama's presidential campaign relied considerably upon the viral capabilities of social networking sites as a way of overcoming perceived mass-media obstacles. In Britain, Tom Watson, the minister for transformational government, has stated that "the challenge is for elected representatives to follow their customers and electors into this brave new world. . . . As well as blogs, there are many more MPs using Facebook and Yahoo Groups to communicate their ideas and listen to others" (see Tom Watson's blog, http://www.tom-watson.co.uk/?p=1899, March 10, 2008).

As well as destabilizing the traditional roles of analogue political communication, digital technologies have modified the communicative balance of power by reconfiguring "access to people, services, information and technology in ways that substantially alter social, organizational and economic relationships across geographical and time boundaries" (Dutton et al. 2004, 32.). As access broadens to

provide an extensive choice of media platforms, channels, and content, and unprecedented opportunities to store and retrieve media content, new patterns of media use are emerging with distinct sociocultural advantages for some groups. For example, the young, the housebound, and diasporic minorities are three groups that have in many cases benefited from the reconfigured social connections that the Internet affords. In the context of political democracy, voters who go online to seek information, interact with campaigns, and share their views with other citizens are likely to feel better informed, more politically efficacious, and more willing to participate in the democratic process (Shah, Kwak, and Holbert 2001; Johnson and Kaye 2003; Kenski and Stroud 2006; Xenos and Moy 2007; Shah et al. 2007).

However, traditional forms of political communication persist. Television remains dominant as the most highly resourced and far-reaching medium of mass communication; it thus continues to be the locus for "media events" (Dayan and Katz 1992) and the main source of political information for most people (Graber 1990; Chaffee and Frank 1996; Sanders and Gavin 2004; Jerit, Barabas, and Bolsen 2006). But the media ecology that surrounds television is being radically reconfigured with major consequences for the norms and practices of political communication. What exactly has changed?

Channel Multiplication; Audience Fragmentation

The mass television audience is in decline. Viewers are faced with more choices than ever before about what to watch, when to watch it, and how to receive it. Until the early 1980s, the British television audience had access to only three terrestrial television channels: BBC1, BBC2, and ITV. The 85 percent of British television viewers who in 2008 had digital sets have access to more than two hundred digital channels, as well as five terrestrials. In the last year of the twentieth century, the five terrestrial channels accounted for 86 percent of the annual share of the television audience. By 2007, their share had fallen to 63 percent. As Britain's public service broadcaster, the BBC's two channels had a combined audience share of 39 percent in 1999; by 2007, it had fallen to 31 percent (BARB, Annual Shares of Individual Viewing, http://www.barb.co.uk/). The collapsing centrality of terrestrial-based television channels coincides with significant changes in the spatial arrangement of domestic viewing (most homes now have several sets) and growing technological convergence between television and other, once separate technologies, such as telephones and computers. Watching television is a much less distinctive cultural activity than it was in the days when families gathered around the box to watch the same programs as most of their neighbors. As Livingstone (2004a, 76) has observed, "The activity of viewing . . . is converging with reading, shopping, voting, playing, researching, writing, chatting. Media are now used anyhow, anyplace, anytime." In the face of intensified competition for public attention and information, political news and analysis that might in the past have reached most people in the course of a week's viewing can be easily missed.

Channel choices and time-shifting options lead not only to fragmentation of the mass audience but to the emergence of distinct issue publics: people who only want to be addressed on their own terms in relation to issues that matter to them. For example, MTV or Sky Sport viewers might not want to hear about crises in the global economy or the causes of international tensions; they can exclude themselves from exposure to issues and forms of address that they find unappealing, disturbing, or bewildering. Television's role as a public sphere is diminished by these easy opt-outs, and democracy suffers from the absence of socially cross-cutting exchanges of experience, knowledge, and comment.

"Publicness" Transformed

Television emerged as a mass medium at a time when cultural boundaries between public and private life were unambiguous. Constituting a new kind of communicative space in which the debates, dramas, and decisions of politics could be played out daily, television brought the vibrancy of the public sphere to the domestic intimacy of millions of private homes. At the same time, it made public hitherto private lifeworlds through documentaries, plays, and dramatized serials that allowed the public to witness its own multidimensionality. Reviewing the political role of television in the late 1970s, Anthony Smith (1979, 4) could say that television confers publicity and influence once enjoyed by parliamentary assemblies:

> The media which have come to dominate mass communication since the 1950s have acquired roles of historic proportions and have even provided the society with a wholly new elite sector. In a sense broadcasting sits astride all other groupings and institutions. A little like the House of Commons of the eighteenth century, it is both barometer of influence and lever of power. It is a yardstick of social visibility and at the same time the essential magnifying glass of prestige.

And while much of that power remains intact, with mass-media agendas still key to the wielding of political influence, there is a sense in which other public spaces are now encroaching upon television's historic management of public visibility. It is no longer only television cameras, studios, and formats that politicians need to focus upon as they seek to promote their messages and control their images. The viral energy of the blogosphere, social network sites, and wikis constitutes a new flow of incessantly circulating publicity in which reputations are enhanced and destroyed, messages debated and discarded, rumors floated and tested. From Senator Trent Lott's incautiously disparaging remarks about the civil rights movement at what he thought was a private gathering, to Senator George Allen's offensive mockery of an Indian opponent at a campaign rally, the slips, gaffes, indelicacies, insults, and errors that were once confined to relative invisibility are now captured and circulated through online media in ways that can disrupt elite agendas and ruin political reputations. The ubiquity of media technologies, from mobile phone cameras and pocket recorders to

always-on Internet connections, are eradicating traditional barriers between public and private. As Meyrowitz (1985, 271) has observed, "When actors lose part of their rehearsal time, their performances naturally move toward the extemporaneous." As a consequence, mediated publicity has become a 24/7 presence; from reality TV (in which the private is publicized) to political interviews (in which the impersonal is increasingly personalized), the contours of the public sphere are being reshaped in ways to which political actors must learn to adjust.

Interactivity and Remixing

Television is the quintessential broadcast medium: it transmits messages to a mass audience expected to receive or reject what it is offered. The inherent feedback path of digital media subverts this transmission ethos by allowing message receivers to act upon media content. The digital text is never complete; the fluidity of bits and bytes makes digital communication radically different from broadcasting. In the context of political communication, this has entailed a profound shift in the process of message circulation. Whereas political actors were once concerned to produce polished, finished performances for public consumption, contemporary politicians are compelled to think about interactive audiences and their capacity to question, challenge, redistribute, and modify the messages that they receive. In the era of digital interactivity, the production of political messages and images is much more vulnerable to disruption at the point of reception.

Of course, interactivity is not entirely new. Radio phone-ins have existed for half a century, and even in their high-profile television appearances politicians have encountered critical studio audiences and telephone callers putting them on the spot. Media interactivity has provided a vernacular tone to political debate, allowing lay voices into what was once deemed to be a highly exclusive discourse. Television's recent obsession with interactive content has often been unfocused and seemingly pointless, marred in the United Kingdom by a series of phone-in scandals in which viewers were invited to vote for outcomes over which producers never intended to cede control. Despite this failure by television producers to understand the psychological commitments entailed by interactive communication, it is here to stay. Interactivity is neither an add-on nor a novelty but an innate property of digital media. One cannot credibly establish a Web site, blog, or e-mail list with a view to simply transmitting messages without taking account of the consequent feedback.

The Internet has expanded the range of political sources. On one hand, agenda setting is no longer a politician-journalist duopoly; on the other, the commentariat is no longer an exclusive club. This has led to a radical expansion of the political realm to include aspects of the mundane and the popular, such as celebrity behavior, football management, domestic relationships, and reality TV conflicts. Beyond the subject matter, the style of public interest content has

tended to depart from the professional forms that once dominated "high politics." And yet it cannot be ignored by political elites, who are increasingly engaged in efforts to monitor the blogosphere, control the content of wikis, and make their presence felt in unfamiliar environments such as Facebook and YouTube.

As well as the need to respond to the buzz of media interactivity, political actors must consider the possibility that their messages will be modified once they are launched into mediaspace. The digital media environment does not respect the integrity of information; once it has been published online, others are at liberty to remix content, in much the same way as music fans are able to reorder and reconstruct beats, melodies, and lyrics. A good example of such remixing is TheyWorkForYou, a Web site launched in 2004 by independent social hacktivists with the aim of aggregating content from the official *Hansard* reports so that the British Parliament's proceedings could be more comprehensible and accessible to the lay public. The site (http://www.theyworkforyou.com) allows users to track a particular issue or MP, comment on parliamentary proceedings, and register for regular updates on selected themes. This process is known as a "mash-up": a rearrangement of original data with a view to making it more meaningful, usable, or entertaining. For political communicators long used to attaching value to their ownership and control of information, mash-up culture presents a formidable challenge.

The Consequences for Political Communication

Our argument that television remains a significant medium for political communication, but is situated within a reconfigured media ecology, has significant consequences for all of the key actors. It is to the new pressures facing each of these actors that we now turn.

Consequences for the mass media

Producers of political coverage on television, from news broadcasts to election campaign reports and issue analyses, are under intense pressure to compete for the attention of the fragmented audience. Television news viewing has declined significantly in recent years, as have audiences for major political occasions, such as candidate debates and election results. Now that viewers have far more options, there is an increased premium on the production of arresting content. Top political broadcasters are projected as stars. Some journalists respond by simplifying political complexities to expand their audience. They have tried to engage viewers in making and commenting upon political narratives, as well as injecting a more compelling dramaturgical flavor to coverage. Politics is often projected as an arena of gamesmanship, failure, scandal, and gaffes rather than the deliberative discussion of issues.

Faced with an array of bloggers, citizen-journalists, and contributors of user-generated content, professional journalists are increasingly on the defensive

(Lowrey 2006), needing to redefine the nature of their contribution to the political public sphere beyond "simply telling the story." In the crowded contemporary media space they now inhabit, journalists have a unique opportunity to provide authoritative interpretation, free from the most obvious distortions of partisanship; decipher the vast daily swarm of official and partisan political messages with a view to separating information from propaganda; and filter the vast amount of data, news, rumor, and conversation that is now readily accessible, with a view to presenting a broad and balanced account of political events and ideas. But will they be able to seize it?

In addressing audiences that are still larger than those ever reached by Web sites or blogs, professional television journalists have a vital role in reflecting public concerns and speaking to their viewers as a general public rather than as fragmented and segregated audience segments. In short, television still performs a public service function, but this function is struggling to survive in an increasingly market-driven, competitive media environment. Political broadcasters are under pressure to operate across media platforms and engage collaboratively with a broad spectrum of off-line as well as online communities. This pressure takes its toll in terms of working hours required to produce 24/7, cross-platform content, sometimes at the cost of journalistic depth and even accuracy.

Alongside these myriad domestic pressures, television journalists find themselves more exposed than ever before to global issues that impinge upon their coverage of domestic politics. As news budgets diminish, the need to be physically present in more parts of the world increases. As political coverage moves online, there is an added pressure to reach out to international audiences that are able to access content without regard for borders.

Consequences for governments/politicians

Governments and other political actors are forced to deal with more spaces of mediation than ever before. Whereas in the relatively recent past, political communication strategists had a limited range of press, television, and radio bases to cover, they are now involved in multidimensional impression management. This leads to an inevitable loosening of their control over the political agenda, forcing politicians into an increasingly responsive mode rather than the proactive, agenda-setting role they would prefer to adopt. To cover the broad, dynamic, and often unpredictable media environment in which they now operate, political actors are compelled to adopt elaborate cross-media strategies, which may amount to little more than keeping up with the incessant flow of relevant information and hoping to spot embarrassing media content before it damages them.

As political discourse takes a more vernacular, quotidian form, politicians are under pressure to present themselves as personalities with whom citizens would want to interact. The need to construct sincere, authentic personas capable of inspiring trust and generating conversational (parasocial) interaction places new communicative burdens upon political actors who must develop skills

in appearing "just like you" and seeming to address "everyone as someone" (Coleman and Moss 2008; Scannell 2000).

At the same time, as citizens increasingly experience interactive relationships with supermarkets, banks, travel companies, and music stores, they express frustration when local councils, members of parliament, and government departments seem incapable of engaging with them online. While governments now deliver numerous services online and provide a wide variety of local, national, and supranational information portals, they tend to offer few interactive features for citizens wanting to provide feedback (Dunleavy et al. 2005). In the interactive era, government has not proved to be a particularly good conversationalist. Politicians speak with increasing frequency about the need for government to listen to and converse with the public, but there are very few examples of good practice; many politicians lack confidence in entering into public discussion beyond the protective walls of the broadcasting studio.

Consequences for citizens

It has never been easy for citizens to become informed and make their voices heard. While the Internet offers an unprecedented opportunity for people to access useful information and engage in civic activities (Bimber 2003; Shah et al. 2005), clear evidence shows that the new media environment is blighted by problems of information overload (Livingstone 2004b; Couldry and Langer 2005) and uncertainty about what to trust (Uslaner 2004; Welch, Hinnant, and Moon 2005; Dutton and Shepherd 2006). There is a need, therefore, for sources of interpretive clarity. While search engines, recommender systems, and wikis are used pragmatically to find, filter, and scrutinize the abundant stores of online information that are now available, these are no substitute for the strong, authoritative signals that television traditionally afforded seekers of political knowledge.

Moreover, while citizens have access to more information and communication resources than ever before, these are not distributed equally. Access differentials reflect patterns of social inequality, with poorer, less educated people least likely to have access to or skills in using the Internet. The growing importance of the online environment could serve to strengthen the voices of the privileged, leaving citizens with limited resources, skills, or confidence reliant upon a narrowing range of mass-media sources providing shallow political information.

Citizens who do have access to the Internet are increasingly energized by the many opportunities for them to ask questions, enter dialogue, raise issues, tell stories, and investigate current affairs; but at the same time, they experience traditional frustrations of political inefficacy. While the Internet offers unparalleled chances to interact with government, elected representatives, and institutions of supranational governance, such as the European Commission, there is meager evidence that their inputs have much impact on policy formation. A disorientating sense of being technologically connected, but politically disconnected, fuels civic disengagement; citizens come to believe that politicians are bound to resist the democratic potentiality of interactive communication technologies (Muhlberger 2003; Kenski and Stroud 2006; Coleman, Morrison, and Svennevig 2008).

Television and Politics—A More Ambivalent Relationship

In the digital era, the relationship between television and politics has become less clear-cut and more ambivalent. While television remains the principal constructor and coproducer of political messages, the systemic entanglement between journalistic and political elites is threatened by new players in the media game. This "fifth estate" (Dutton 2007) sees itself much more in the position of the eighteenth-century fourth estate: reporting, scrutinizing, and commenting from a critical distance, rather than entering into the portals of institutional power. In contrast, broadcast journalists, having become political insiders capable of shaping agendas, find themselves handicapped by their closeness to power.

At the same time, television's emphasis upon political personalization continues unabated. Political leaders who do not look right on television and do not understand its implicit grammar face major disadvantages. In the new media ecology, political actors are under greater pressure than ever to construct rounded media images, not only on television and in the press, but across a range of outlets. In doing so, however, they have to compete with many others who are in search of public attention, on far more equal terms than previously. In Italy, the radical comedian Beppe Grillo has established the country's most popular blog, attracting far more public comments than those sent to the major political parties. Politicians, parties, and governments cannot expect to attract public attention simply because of the legitimacy of their positions; authority within the new media ecology has to be earned by demonstrating commitments to interactive and networked communication that do not come easily to elite political actors.

While television continues to be the principal conduit between the home and the public sphere, both of these spaces have changed since the heyday of broadcasting. Television remains central to the routines and securities of everyday life (Silverstone 1994), but domestic spaces have become more fragmented, as families disperse within and beyond them. Grand televisual events still bring people together, but the experience of media access is now much more individualized, as particularly younger people spend more time using personalized, hybrid forms of public-privatized media technologies. A negative effect of family breakdown has been the reduction of the interpersonal communication about politics that has traditionally been a key force for socializing political participation. The public sphere, as mediated through television and newer communication technologies, has taken an anti-institutional turn, focusing more earnestly upon forms of informal, communitarian, and networked public presence. In many respects, the digital media networks are more sensitive to this circulatory public sphere than television, with its centralized distance from the grassroots, is capable of being.

And whereas televised coverage of politics diminished partisanship by reducing possibilities for selective exposure, the new media ecology makes it easier to establish partisan patterns of media access by creating more scope for selectivity

and more opportunities for group herding and opinion polarization (Sunstein 2001; Mutz 2006; Feldman and Price 2008). The absence of an online equivalent to the public service broadcasting ethos raises profound risks for democracy. Television production might have been industrially top-heavy, unaccountable, and often authoritarian, but it was susceptible to regulation likely to generate some semblance of balanced political coverage.

In the new media ecology, communication strategists need to work harder than ever to cover the expanded media landscape and to adopt new styles in order not to seem contrived, insincere, and heavy-handed. Vast spin operations have turned political marketing from a means of conveying policies and images to a means of determining them. An emphasis upon generating apparently spontaneous discussion is now preferred to didactic declarations about policy. The cultural appeal of the media amateur, posting spontaneously, sporadically, and incompletely contrasts with the clinical efficiency of the party war room. In an age when politicians do not benefit from seeming to be politicians, affected unprofessionalism may well hold the key to successful communication. Explicitly or otherwise, politicians probably remain yet more dependent upon professional campaign and image management and under pressure to find novel ways of presenting themselves within the ever-expanding spaces of the media.

The future of this ambivalent relationship between television and politics, and of political communication more generally, entails normative policy choices. Contrary to the forceful rhetoric of technological determinism, new means of producing, distributing, receiving, and acting upon information do not in themselves shape or reshape the media ecology. Unanticipated and misunderstood, technological innovations not only disrupt settled cultural arrangements but also appear to possess teleological propensities of their own. In the early days of television—and before it, radio and the printing press—many commentators assumed that culture could not withstand their inherent effects. But this is a mistake: technologies are culturally shaped as well as shaping. In these first years of the twenty-first century, policies to shape the new media ecology in a democratic direction are still in their infancy. It is high time for such a policy to be devised, debated, and implemented.

Shaping the New Media Ecology

This emerging complex new media ecology presents several worrying implications for democratic citizenship that warrant policy intervention. An initial concern is that media contain little civically useful political content. Although users have more content to choose from, more channels and platforms from which to receive it, and more opportunities than ever before to comment upon the political events and issues of the day, the overall amount and quality of in-depth, thought-provoking, deliberative, or investigative political news and analysis is atrophying in a media landscape that is increasingly dominated by a focus upon celebrity, rumor, and attack. Politics is presented to the public as a cynical game. Jamieson's (1993,

186) contention that a media focus upon polls and strategy serves to distort the agenda and distract the electorate is supported by subsequent experimental research (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Moy and Pfau 2000).

Another concern lies in the weakening of public service obligations upon media producers, which has resulted in a marginalization of the citizen role. At the same time, there is a pervasive conception of audience members and new-media users as self-seeking consumers, free-floating individuals, or sensation-seeking hedonists rather than active and responsible members of political communities. Sunstein's (2001, 177) concern about "like-minded people who talk or even live, much of the time, in isolated enclaves" is relevant here, for a fundamental prerequisite of a democratic public sphere is the possibility of encountering others whose positions, perspectives, and values differ from one's own. Without exposure to cross-cutting networks of pluralistic information and opinion, traditionally provided by non-demand-led media formats, it becomes difficult to nurture potentially informed and engaged citizens.

Also worrisome is the gap between the energy and creativity of what Dutton (2007) has called the fifth estate and the powers wielded by the other four estates. In short, the spaces and networks of digital media are at risk of being so disconnected that institutional elites forming policies and making decisions can afford to ignore them. A subterranean universe of blogs, wikis, YouTube videos, and virtual communities cannot compete with the mass media's elite-molded agendas; exclusive access to policy makers; and capacity to frame, measure, and represent public opinion. A paradox of recent media trends has been the increasing incorporation of "the public" into media productions, such as phone-ins, studio debates, online forums, and reality TV, while citizens are left feeling more excluded than ever from influence over the media, government, or public affairs in general (Entman 1989; Bucy and Gregson 2001; Pattie, Seyd, and Whiteley 2003; Syvertsen 2004; Coleman and Ross 2009).

These trends can be reversed, but it will require policy directed toward a more democratic integration of media and politics. Just as it was deemed necessary in the early days of the twentieth century to ask fundamental questions about the potential of broadcasting to enhance, diminish, or reshape citizenship, so in the reconfigured media ecology of the early twenty-first century such questions must be revisited. In doing so, communication scholars can help policy makers to avoid some of the more crass assumptions that misguided the earlier debates. Media effects are not direct and undifferentiated; civic norms cannot be injected into populations through patrician strategies; there cannot and should not be a single public sphere in which the nation would gather "as one man" (Reith 1949, 4); it should not be imagined that media content will be received by patriarchal families, gathered around the domestic set, and journalists should not see themselves as the sole authors of the first draft of history. Broadcasting shaped and was shaped by a set of beliefs about the communication of citizenship that would be likely to distract us from making sense of the new media ecology. Instead, contemporary policy thinking needs to acknowledge a number of significant changes in the complexion of public communication. These include the following:

- *The ubiquity of information and communication technologies, which are no longer monopolized by industrially centralized, professional organizations.* As more people have gained access to media technologies, the capacity to gather information, set agendas, and hold the powerful to account has broadened. But this broadening has not usually been accompanied by opportunities to deliberate collectively about matters of common concern. In short, media production has expanded alongside a fragmentation of public reception.
- *A more diffuse notion of the public.* No longer defined simply in terms of national subjectivity, the public has become more culturally fractured, politically postdeferential, and volatile in its consumption choices. The notion of a singular public sphere, dominated by codified standards of civility, is less realizable than a space of pluralistic interaction within and between diverse social networks. Out of such interactions may come a range of interpretations and enactments of citizenship.
- *Less emphasis upon television as the provision of a public service and more emphasis upon its ability to open up a public space.* Whereas the important role of public service broadcasting has been to develop and promote common knowledge, the expanded role of public communication space is to become an open arena for the production and distribution of potentially universal value.
- *A recasting of the idea of citizenship to take into account the terms of a new relationship between public and private life.* Civic and political roles have percolated into homes, schools, workplaces, shops, and nightclubs. The political no longer relates only to institutions of the state but has come to describe a range of daily encounters with power that give rise to civic—and uncivic—responses. If the media are to promote citizenship in the early twenty-first century, this must embrace much more than occasional moments of voting in elections or being addressed by politicians.
- *An acknowledgement by governments at different levels (local, national, and supranational) that the risks and complexities of governance cannot be managed without drawing upon the experience, expertise, and networked linkages of the represented public.* While this is widely recognized by smart governments and politicians, mechanisms capable of capturing, filtering, summarizing, and acting upon public knowledge remain crude and inefficient, resulting in a pervasive sense that government consultations and "listening" exercises cannot be trusted.

These new features of political communication present formidable challenges for media policy makers. Thus far, governments, regulators, and mass-media executives acknowledge that the media ecology is changing but cling to long-standing paradigms and models to explain and regulate it. The broadcast ethos still prevails in most policy thinking, with many-to-many interactivity, social networking, and user-generated content regarded as a secondary tier of public communication. This approach pays too much attention to technological changes that seem to be revolutionizing the media, while neglecting the cultural and political reconfigurations that are much more far-reaching.

New technologies are most certainly implicated in the changes we have described, but they do not determine the direction and do not possess teleological propensities. In short, the Internet is not "good" or "bad" for democracy. But from a normative perspective, which regards communication media as always having an emancipatory, democratic potential, the pressing requirement is to base policy upon theoretical and empirical knowledge.

Our approach to the current policy challenge, which we have outlined and revised over the past decade (Blumler and Coleman 2001; Coleman and Blumler

2008), is to nurture the emancipatory potential of the new media ecology by carving out within it a trusted online space where the dispersed energies, self-articulations, and aspirations of citizens can be rehearsed, in public, within a process of ongoing feedback to the various levels and centers of governance. The civic commons, as we have called it, would be an enduring structure that would serve as a protected space of civic interaction, in all of the pluralistic senses that this is now understood. It would be a space in which individuals and groups could campaign to set legislative agendas, parliamentary and council committees could consult with citizens online, government departments and agencies could be held to account by service users, and the most pressing and sensitive questions of the day could be opened up to well-moderated and consequential public deliberation. The civic commons, as we understand it, would be a space of agonistic politics as well as consensus-seeking, of rational discourse as well as many other ways of expressing views and values, and of institutional as well as grassroots citizenship. Creating an online civic commons would involve the establishment of an entirely new kind of public agency, funded by government but independent from it in its everyday work, charged with forging fresh links between communication and politics and connecting the voice of the people more meaningfully to the daily activities of democratic institutions.[1] Within such a space, television and politics will continue to be mutually dependent. But this complementarity will converge increasingly with an array of other information and communication technologies that reconfigure access to the institutions, events, and debates that once took place exclusively on the other side of the screen.

Note

1. The terms and shape of this institutional arrangement are outlined more fully in Coleman and Blumler (2008).

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