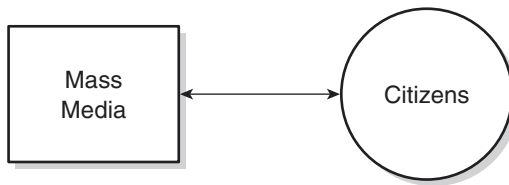


3

Mediated Deliberation and Public Opinion



I'm not going to be your monkey.

—Jon Stewart, anchor of *The Daily Show*

On October 15, 2004, CNN's political talk show *Crossfire* brought into its studio Jon Stewart, the host of Comedy Central's *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. The next thirty minutes were among the most important in the history of live television:¹

Co-host Tucker Carlson: Well, he's been called the most trusted name in fake news. Next, we're joined by Jon Stewart for his one-of-a-kind take on politics, the press, and America. . . .

Stewart: Thank you very much. That was very kind of you to say. Can I say something very quickly? Why do we have to fight? [Laughter] . . . [In pitying voice] Why do you argue, the two of you? [Laughter] I hate to see it.

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Carlson: We enjoy it. . . . Let me ask you a question. . . . Is John Kerry really the best the Democrats can do?

Stewart: I thought Al Sharpton was very impressive. I enjoyed his way of speaking. I think, oftentimes, the person that knows they can't win is allowed to speak the most freely, because, otherwise, shows with titles such as *Crossfire* . . . or *Hardball* or "I'm Going to Kick Your Ass" will jump on it. In many ways, it's funny. I made a special effort to come on the show today because I have privately, amongst my friends and also in occasional newspapers and television shows, mentioned this show as being bad.

Co-host

Begala: We have noticed.

Stewart: And I wanted to—I felt that that wasn't fair and I should come here and tell you that I don't—it's not so much that it's bad, as it's hurting America. But I wanted to come here today and say . . . stop, stop, stop, stop hurting America.

Begala: OK now.

Stewart: And come work for us. . . . See, the thing is, we need your help. Right now, you're helping the politicians and the corporations. And we're left out there to mow our lawns.

Begala: By beating up on them? You just said we're too rough on them when they make mistakes.

Stewart: No, no, no, you're not too rough on them. You're part of their strategies. You are partisan, what do you call it, hacks. . . .

[Carlson critiques Stewart for not asking presidential candidate John Kerry tough questions when Kerry appeared on his program.]

Stewart: I didn't realize that—and maybe this explains quite a bit—the news organizations look to Comedy Central for their cues on integrity. [Laughter] So what I would suggest is, when you talk about holding politicians' feet to fire, I think that's disingenuous. . . .

Carlson: We're here to love you, not confront you. . . .

Stewart: No, no, no, but what I'm saying is this. I'm not. I'm here to confront you, because we need help from the media, and they're hurting us.

Begala: *Crossfire* reduces everything, as I said in the intro, to left, right, black, white . . . because, see, we're a debate show.

Stewart: No, no, no, no, that would be great. . . . I would love to see a debate show.

- Begala: We're 30 minutes in a 24-hour day where we have each side on, as best we can get them, and have them fight it out.
- Stewart: No, no, no, no, that would be great. To do a debate would be great. But that's like saying pro wrestling is a show about athletic competition. [Laughter]
- Carlson: Jon, Jon, Jon, I'm sorry. I think you're a good comedian. I think your lectures are boring. . . .
- Stewart: But the thing is that this—you're doing theater, when you should be doing debate, which would be great. It's not honest. What you do is not honest. What you do is partisan hackery. And I will tell you why I know it.
- Carlson: You had John Kerry on your show and you sniff his throne and you're accusing us of partisan hackery?
- Stewart: Absolutely. . . . You're on CNN. The show that leads into me is puppets making crank phone calls. [Laughter] What is wrong with you? . . . You know, the interesting thing I have is, you have a responsibility to the public discourse, and you fail miserably.
- Carlson: You need to get a job at a journalism school, I think.
- Stewart: You need to go to one. The thing that I want to say is, when you have people on for just knee-jerk, reactionary talk. . . .
- Carlson: Wait. I thought you were going to be funny. Come on. Be funny.
- Stewart: No. No. I'm not going to be your monkey. [Laughter] I watch your show every day. And it kills me.
- Carlson: I can tell you love it.
- Stewart: It's so—oh, it's so painful to watch. [Laughter] You know, because we need what you do. This is such a great opportunity you have here to actually get politicians off of their marketing and strategy.
- Carlson: Is this really Jon Stewart? What is this, anyway?
- Stewart: Yes, it's someone who watches your show and cannot take it anymore. [Laughter] I just can't.

SOURCE: CNN.com, *Crossfire* (transcript pp. 57–59). Used by permission.

In a nutshell, Stewart argued that the media has “a responsibility to the public discourse” and *Crossfire* “fails miserably” at performing that duty. Stewart asked for substantive debate, not political theater. Because *Crossfire*

presented itself as part of the deliberative process yet engaged in “partisan hackery,” Stewart concluded that what it does “is not honest.”

The charge stuck. Three months later, CNN cancelled *Crossfire*. CNN Chief Executive Jonathan Klein commented, “I guess I come down more firmly in the Jon Stewart camp.” He added, “I doubt that when the president sits down with his advisers they scream at him to bring him up to date on all of the issues,” Klein said. “I don’t know why we don’t treat the audience with the same respect.” Stewart’s reaction was only to acknowledge his bewilderment: “I had no idea that if you wanted a show canceled, all you had to do was say it out loud.”²²

Though *Crossfire* may be off the air, the media continue to play a range of roles in public life, and deliberative theory provides precisely the lens through which Stewart and other critics can continue to identify the media’s triumphs and failures. In this chapter, we grind and polish that critical lens, then look through it to survey the modern media landscape. We begin, however, by considering how we came to be in the mediated world we inhabit today.

Expressing Ourselves Through the Ages

A few things have changed in the course of the past few centuries. There are many more people, and there are many more ways to communicate. Conversation and discussion have always been a source of deliberative activity, from the dawn of civilization to the present day. People do not need a computer or phone to chat with their neighbor about the weather, their children’s school, a recent burglary, or any other issue. But as our communities have grown in size and number over time, so have our communication media.

MEDIA TECHNOLOGY

Table 3.1 offers a whirlwind historical tour that shows an acceleration in both the number of people to communicate with and the ways we can do it. Every advance offers new expressive media, distribution systems, or recording devices. Whether it’s clay tablets, the pony express, or the home computer, each of these is augmenting an ever-growing set of communication tools. One can compare the gaps between major media advances and notice that from the initiation of writing to the creation of paper took roughly 3,000 years, from paper to Gutenberg’s printing press took half as long (roughly 1,500 years); the leap to the electric telegraph took just another 500 years, with the computer coming just 150 years later. One can hopscotch along this historical timeline many different ways, but all show the acceleration in media innovations, leading one to wonder what will come next—and how quickly? Today’s Weblogs and podcasts will seem, sooner than we might think, as primitive as the first awkward, clunky home computer, the pony express, or the earliest clay printing presses.

Table 3.1 Mass Communication and Population 3500 BCE–2012 CE

<i>Year</i>	<i>Technology</i>	<i>World Population</i>	<i>U.S. Census^a</i>
3500–2900 BCE	Writing (Phoenicians, Sumerians, Egyptians)	15 m	? m
1700 BCE	Postal service (Persia)	50 m	
530 BCE	Library (Greece)	100 m	
200–100 BCE	Human message relay systems (Egypt and China)	150 m	
105 BCE	Paper (Tsai Lun)	175 m	
305 CE	Wooden printing press (China)	200 m	
1048	Movable type (Pi Sheng)	250 m	
1450	Metal movable type (Johannes Gutenberg)	400 m	
1714	Typewriter (Henry Mill)	600 m	
1793	Long-distance telegraph (Claude Chappe)	850 m	4 m
1814	Photographic image (Joseph Nicéphore Niépce)	900 m	9 m
1831	Electric telegraph (Joseph Henry)	1 b	13 m
1860	Pony Express relay system (US)	1.2 b	30 m
1877	Phonograph (Thomas Edison)	1.3 b	50 m
1889	Direct dial telephone (Almon Strowger)	1.5 b	60 m
1910	Motion pictures with sound (Thomas Edison)	1.8 b	90 m
1930	“Golden Age” of radio	2.1 b	120 m
1949	Network television in US	2.5 b	150 m
1958	Photocopier (Chester Carlson)	3 b	180 m
1966	Fax machine (Xerox)	3.4 b	190 m
1972	Cable television (HBO)	3.9 b	200 m
1976	Home computer (Apple)	4.2 b	210 m
1979	Cell phones (Japan)	4.4 b	230 m
1991	Global release of Internet (US)	5.4 b	250 m
2012	What’s next?	7.0 b	315 m

SOURCE: Technology timeline is from Mary Bellis, “The History of Communication,” http://inventors.about.com/library/inventors/bl_history_of_communication.htm. Population estimates are from <http://www.census.gov>. For a history of the mass media in the United States, in particular, see Blanchard (1998).

a. There is no solid estimate of how many people inhabited what is now the United States before the official U.S. Census began in the 1700s. Even the lowest estimates assume that there were millions of people, but whether it was five, ten, fifteen—or even many more million—remains unclear. See, for example, Thornton (1987).

Even more fundamentally, these advances in media reflect an aspiration to communicate in the most profound sense of the term. In his historical review of the idea of communication, John Durham Peters explained that “‘communication’ is a registry of modern longings. The term evokes a utopia where nothing is misunderstood, ears are open, and expression is uninhibited.”³ Each new communication technology or method promises to bring us closer together. Electricity’s earliest media offspring, such as the telegraph and radio, transformed the term communication “into a new kind of quasi-physical connection across the obstacles of time and space.”⁴

The idea that mass media could solve our communication problems sounds quaint today. As we shall see in this chapter, most political communication research on mass media reflects serious doubts about the potential for mass media to facilitate deliberation. The deliberative ideal still lingers in the background as a critical standpoint but not as a societal achievement.

MEASURING PUBLIC OPINION

Before turning to contemporary media, however, it is important to note that while mass media technologies proliferated in step with the growing global population, we have also witnessed an expansion in the variety of means for expressing and recording public opinion. Table 3.2 shows how new modes of public expression coincide with significant moments in political history. With the emergence of classical Athens came a clarification of the role of oratory and discussion in democracy. With the gradual development of self-government in Europe came a wave of political communication methods—from pamphleteering to petitioning. Revolutionary protest became a powerful mode of public expression, but postrevolutionary governments eventually ushered in a variety of mass electoral methods and worker strikes. Finally, with the expansion of mass media and the enfranchisement of women and minorities, came modern democratic social movements and new deliberative processes.

Some of these historical modes of public expression intertwine with modern political processes that we examine in detail in this book, such as discussion (Chapter 2), general elections (Chapter 4), jury deliberation (Chapter 6), and modern forms of public meetings (Chapter 7). In this chapter, however, we focus on modes of public opinion expression tied to the modern mass media, including public opinion polling and interactive media, from call-in radio to Internet microjournalism and blogging.

It would be a mistake, however, to say that all of these changes in media and public opinion expression mediums amount to an evolution in society toward evermore democratic modes of talk. As sociologist Anthony Giddens cautioned, “Human history does not have an evolutionary ‘shape’, and . . . harm can be done by attempting to compress it into one.”⁵ This review of historical context

Table 3.2 Expressing and Recording Public Opinion in Historical Context

<i>Year</i>	<i>Mode of Public Expression</i>	<i>Historical Events and Writings</i>
500 BCE	Public rhetoric and discussion	Athenian democracy (500–300 BCE)
1200s	Jury of peers	Magna Carta (1215)
1500s	Political publishing and pamphleteering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • European Renaissance • Protestant Reformation
1600-1700s	Crowds, petitions, salons, and coffeehouses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age of Reason/Enlightenment • <i>Two Treatises of Government</i> (1689)
Late 1700s	Revolutionary movements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • American Revolution (1776) • French Revolution (1789)
Early 1800s	General elections, strikes, and straw polls	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Communist Manifesto</i> (1848) • <i>On Liberty</i> (1859)
Mid 1800s	Modern newspapers and letters to editors/officials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>New York Times</i> founded (1851) • Australian secret ballot (1850s)
Late 1800s	Initiative and referenda	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Swiss Federal Constitution (1848) • Women's suffrage in New Zealand (1893)
Early 1900s	Mass media political programs and random sample surveys	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Franklin D. Roosevelt's fireside chats begin (1933)^a • Gallup Poll established (1935)
Mid 1900s	Modern social movements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gandhi's salt march to Dandi (1930) • Montgomery bus boycott (1955)
Late 1900s	Modern deliberative processes and global social movements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Citizen juries developed (1974)^b • Seattle World Trade Organization protests (1999)

SOURCE: Adapted and expanded from Herbst (1993), p. 48.

a. Ryfe (1999).

b. Crosby and Nethercutt (2005).

simply serves as a reminder that what it means for the mass public to deliberate today depends critically on how we conceptualize mass media and public opinion in the modern world.

What Is Mediated Deliberation?

This brings us to the question, what does mediated deliberation mean, exactly? Benjamin Page advanced this conception of deliberation in *Who Deliberates? Mass Media in Modern Democracy*. Page argued that the sheer size of the mass

public, along with the complexity of modern public problems, makes it impossible to rely on only face-to-face conversation and discussion. It would also be a mistake to rely solely on elected officials to deliberate on the public's behalf, as this would make the public too weak to hold its leaders accountable. Somehow, for the public to "actively control what its government does, the public, collectively, must be well informed. Some kind of effective public deliberation is required that involves the citizenry of the whole."⁶

What Page proposes is a "division of labor" between the mass public and the "professional communicators," including "reporters, writers, commentators, and television pundits, as well as public officials and selected experts from academia or think tanks."⁷ Through the elaborate communication technology and industry of the mass media, these communication professionals convey information, values, and diverse points of view to the mass public, which then deliberates vicariously through the give-and-take and to-and-fro of these various professionals.

This view of deliberation fits with the conception of deliberation advanced by Jurgen Habermas, whose "ideal speech situation" (described in Chapter 2) laid the foundation for modern deliberative theory. In a 2006 essay on media and democracy, Habermas argued that "only across the system as a whole can deliberation be expected to operate as a cleansing mechanism that filters out the 'muddy' elements from a discursively structured legitimation process."⁸ Paralleling Page's view, Habermas argued that no modern political process could function effectively without the "professionals of the media system" and the various elites who produce mediated political communication. Ideally, this mass-mediated deliberation serves the following functions:

to mobilize and pool relevant issues and required information, and to specify interpretations; to process such contributions discursively by means of proper arguments for and against; and to generate rationally motivated *yes* and *no* attitudes [i.e., public opinions] that are expected to determine the outcome of procedurally correct decisions.⁹

In its ideal form, this mediated deliberation prominently features the very kind of programming that Jon Stewart pleaded for in his *Crossfire* appearance—a debate show that honestly presents conflicting points of view in a way that helps viewers work through the issues for themselves. In this perfect world, mass communication media would promote public knowledge and enlightened public opinion through engaging, substantive programming that goes beyond mere "theater" and "partisan hackery," to use Stewart's phrasing.

The middle column of Figure 3.1 formalizes this conception of the collective responsibility of media producers, which prominently includes television newscasters, newspaper editors, and information Web site managers. An important point here is that this responsibility is best understood as applying

to the media system as a whole, rather than an individual producer, let alone an individual piece of reporting or a single program. For instance, consider criterion B2: "Present the broadest possible range of solutions to problems, including nongovernmental and unpopular ones." It makes more sense to think of this as a collective responsibility of the media than to expect such breadth of every single story or telecast on the subject. By analogy, a healthy diet includes fruits, vegetables, grains, and protein-rich foods, but nobody wants to subsist on a multivitamin-style glop that blends all these nutrients together into a nasty-tasting gruel. So all we should ask is that content producers provide nutritious and delicious content that contributes to a media diet that is, on the whole, deliberative.

Another important point is to broaden our conception of media, at least momentarily. The focus in this chapter is on public affairs news media—the sort of programming Jon Stewart produces and critiques—from the evening news to talk shows to newspapers, magazines, and Web sites on current affairs. But it is important to recognize that the process of mediated deliberation can also include entertainment media, such as films, novels, and theater. In reality, many people learn about historical events or other life experiences through these media, whether it's a drama about World War II, a novel about growing up poor in the South, or a play that addresses child abuse. Australian philosopher Robert Goodin explained this point:

It is not just that fiction (and art more generally) might, and often does, contain allusions to social, economic, political and historical facts, and in that way might serve certain didactic purposes. The larger point is that those lessons come packed with more emotional punch and engage our imagination in more effective ways than do historical narratives or reflective essays of a less stylized sort.¹⁰

Because political communication—and deliberation—literature focuses more on news media than it does on the larger world of art, fiction, and other cultural or entertainment media, this chapter has a similar focus. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that there is more to the deliberative media diet than news alone. Beyond the more obvious examples are works and performances that stretch one's perception of reality. Comedian Richard Pryor accomplished this, and when he passed away in 2005, fellow comic Jerry Seinfeld described Pryor in this way: "He started with what he knew and brought you to it. He made you fall in love with him. And he did it so that you would relate to things you didn't think you could relate to."¹¹

Goodin's philosophical writings also draw attention to the deliberation that takes place inside an individual's mind—what he calls "deliberation within."¹² The point in having a deliberative media process is for individuals to hear conflicting considerations and weigh them to arrive at their own judgments. Even

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	<i>Media Producers</i>	<i>Media Users</i>
<i>Analytic Process</i>		
Create a solid information base.	Present media users with a broad base of background information by reporting extensively on important issues.	Seek out opportunities to learn of others' experiences and relevant expert analyses.
Prioritize the key values at stake.	Explore the underlying public concerns behind the surface facts and events that define an issue.	Consider the diverse concerns underlying issues and how others prioritize issues differently.
Identify a broad range of solutions.	Present the broadest possible range of solutions to problems, including nongovernmental and unpopular ones.	Learn about how people like or unlike yourself think about addressing a problem.
Weigh the pros, cons, and trade-offs among solutions.	Report different viewpoints but do more than juxtapose them; subject them to careful scrutiny.	Reassess your biases favoring or opposing different solutions by seeing how others weigh pros and cons.
Make the best decision possible.	Make recommendations but keep editorial content distinct from news; leave the decision to the media user.	Take responsibility for making up your own mind after listening to the advice of experts, partisans, and others.
<i>Social Process</i>		
Adequately distribute speaking opportunities.	Use diverse sourcing, invite diverse guests with different ways of speaking, and reach beyond conventional debates (left/right).	Make time to listen to sources with views different from your own. Add your own voice when appropriate.
Ensure mutual comprehension.	Make news and information understandable for readers; prose should be accessible to the audience.	When you cannot understand an issue or argument, seek clarification from others.
Consider other ideas and experiences.	Take arguments from all perspectives seriously.	When hearing different views, avoid tuning out or ruminating on counterarguments before considering what is said.
Respect other participants.	Model respect for different views; treat readers with respect by making news serious but engaging.	Give the benefit of the doubt to sources but demand better behavior from those who violate your trust.

Figure 3.1 Key Features of Mediated Deliberation

when people ultimately choose to attend deliberative forums, they have likely viewed, read, and heard considerable media information and engaged in a process of internal reflection.

Thus, the right-hand column of Figure 3.1 shows the criteria by which we can judge whether an individual has engaged in mediated deliberation on a public issue. For example, whereas the media's responsibility for identifying a broad range of solutions is to present such breadth, as the media user, your responsibility is to "learn about how people like or unlike yourself think about addressing a problem." The media provides diverse perspectives and you should use enough of these media opportunities to learn about these different perspectives.

To take another example, criterion B1 assesses the adequacy of speaking opportunities. For the media producers, this requires that they "use diverse sourcing, invite diverse guests to speak in different voices, and reach beyond conventional debates." For you as a media consumer, this means that you must "make time to listen to sources with views different from your own" and "add your own voice when appropriate."

The point of creating a detailed definition of mediated deliberation is to have a critical yardstick against which we can measure the behavior of actual media producers and users. To what extent do media practices approximate the deliberative ideal, and in what ways are they less than deliberative? More specifically, the remainder of this chapter asks how the media functions in the United States.

Do We Have a Deliberative Media System?

Studies of the media fill volumes, and we cannot hope to even glimpse the full breadth of such work in this chapter's review of current research. Instead, we will on questions about how the media cover important public issues, with emphasis on the practice of reporting and the interplay of mass media and public opinion.

INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM

Perhaps the most important question about media coverage of important public events is, did they get the story right? How in-depth is the reporting, and did they miss the story altogether? One simple indicator of how well news organizations are doing is the frequency of original investigative reporting. Most often, a news outlet responds to external events—crises, public events, crime reports, or even press releases. Sometimes, however, the media do original research and investigation, whether on a reporter's hunch or in response to an outside source—as with the famous "Deep Throat," who helped spur the *Washington Post's* articles on the Watergate coverup, which brought down President Nixon.

On the bright side, a recent survey of 103 local television news directors around the United States found that seventy-five percent of “local news stations are still doing investigative reporting,” with twenty-five percent employing full-time investigative staff. Also, “half of those doing it say they are willing to investigate their sponsors.”¹³ From a more pessimistic viewpoint, however, one can see that these figures also mean that a majority of newsrooms either do no investigative reporting or are unwilling to investigate those who advertise on their station.

Worse still, the trend over time is not encouraging. The frequency of original watchdog reporting has declined steadily: such reportage accounted for fewer than one of every one hundred fifty stories in 2002, compared to one in sixty in 1998. According to the survey’s authors, “Serious investigative work takes resources and time, two things news directors increasingly say are in short supply.”¹⁴

The decline in the frequency of such reporting has many causes, including the ever-stronger profit motive and the perception that investigative reporting does not pay for itself in increased audience size or loyalty. Other causes include successful libel suits against newsmakers, along with the humbling public ridicule following flawed investigations, such as the flawed story on George Bush’s military service that forced Dan Rather to step down as anchor at CBS.¹⁵ The increased emphasis on light, entertaining news programming also discourages spending resources on the kinds of investigations that result in grim (and often quite complex) reports.¹⁶

Lest we conclude that the mass media had a golden age that is now lost, the historical record is replete with serious errors and blunders in past reporting, even by the most venerated news organizations. Consider the *New York Times’s* coverage of the early months of Hitler’s term as German chancellor in 1933. Even though other media were reporting on the violence and civil unrest taking place in the country as Hitler consolidated the Nazi regime, a March 20 editorial reassured readers that the new regime was “not contemplating anything startling or wild in foreign policy.” And a February 26 editorial compared the Storm Troopers to “a gang of sophomores trying to break up the freshman dinner.”¹⁷

FAIRNESS AND BALANCE

When a story is covered by the media, is the coverage balanced and fair-minded? Benjamin Page asked this question of a more recent story covered by the *New York Times*, the 1991 U.S. war against Iraq. Page focused on the editorial pages of the *Times* from November 9, 1990, to January 15, 1991, to see if the paper incorporated a diversity of views on the war from a variety of sources. As for the voices represented on the editorial pages, the editors and regular columnists writing for the *Times* accounted for sixty-nine percent of the significant discussions of the issue, with another ten percent coming from current and former government officials, nine percent from “think tanks,” and the rest from various writers and advocates. Beyond the dominance of the usual voices heard

in the *Times*, Page noted that there were relatively few columns by experts on the Middle East, prominent religious or philosophical voices, or peace groups. Ordinary citizens got the chance to express their voices on these pages of the *Times*, though they did so exclusively in the Letters section.¹⁸

What was said is more important than who said it. The *Times's* editors took a consistent stance in their unsigned editorials: all of these writings favored sanctions. The columnists, by contrast, were evenly divided among three views of the conflict with Iraq: thirty-three percent favored an entirely peaceful solution; thirty-five percent thought the United States should continue to use economic sanctions followed by military intervention, if necessary; and thirty-two percent advocated the immediate use of force. The letters from regular readers of the *Times*, however, overwhelmingly supported the peaceful option, with two-thirds of the letters taking that position. Another twenty-seven percent favored sanctions, with just seven percent calling for immediate military intervention. This more peaceful stance represented in the Letters section was roughly consistent with public opinion at the time.¹⁹

Page concluded his investigation by clarifying his understanding of balance in mediated deliberation: "Although there was indeed 'balance' (rather precise balance) among the three sets of policy stands, other major viewpoints were not included." Not only were ordinary citizens' voices relegated to the Letters section, but also their views on the conflict "were not presented in proportion to their adherents among the general public."²⁰

Following the definition of mediated deliberation in Figure 3.1, however, the absolutely equal balance of views is less important than the adequacy of each view's expression. In this sense, the most important point is that prominent and serious views were shut out of the *Times* debate. As Page noted, very little writing on the editorial pages took seriously the idea of negotiations or concessions, let alone the possibility that Iraq had a legitimate grievance with Kuwait. Instead of offering a sufficient broad range of views, the *Times* arranged its columns "in a balanced and symmetrical fashion, so that they flanked—on the hawkish and the mildly dovish sides—numerous 'centrist' editorials and columns that called for continued sanctions, and force if necessary later," which was precisely the position favored by the *Times* editors.²¹

A team of researchers led by Lance Bennett found more recent evidence that the media often fail to present a balanced account of current events when such balance is most needed. When a powerful executive governs without a strong opposition party, such as in the wake of September 11, 2001, the media have a tendency to mirror the one-sided political terrain with relatively uncritical coverage of a popular administration.²² Following the logic of Page's analysis, if the mass media convey the elite debate to the public so that citizens can deliberate, then it should be no surprise that when there exists an elite consensus—or at least only a weak voice of dissent—the media carry that message, uncritically, to the public.

OBJECTIVITY, EXPERTISE, AND BIAS

Looking beyond the editorial page, a deliberative media system more generally aims to provide not only a balanced mix of viewpoints but also a relatively objective accounting of the relevant facts on an issue. All too often, media coverage of events provides a lazy kind of balance by simply juxtaposing conflicting accounts and views of a controversy without regard to the veracity or implications of either side. When media stop doing investigative reporting and trim their staff while continuing to produce the same volume of news, their already frazzled reporters naturally resort to simplistic “balance” in their stories to avoid inappropriately discounting one or another point of view.

The *Maine Sunday Telegram* illustrates an alternative approach that often better serves the purposes of mediated deliberation. This paper, and others like it, decided to report on local events—from changing workers’ compensation policy to protecting endangered songbirds—from the standpoint of an objective observer who can reach conclusions and pass independent judgment. The *Telegram* called it expert reporting.

Telegram Executive Editor Lou Ureneck gave clear instructions to reporter Eric Blom when he developed their first “expert” story: “We told him to get beyond the whipsaw of competing quotes that are often put into a story for ‘balance,’” Ureneck explained. “We told him to avoid bogging down in excessive attribution, weasel words and hedging phrases. We told him to support his conclusions with facts and to write forcefully in plain language.”²³

Following these guidelines, the first piece in Blom’s four-part series began, “The Maine workers’ compensation system is a disaster. It wastes millions of dollars each year. It destroys employer-employee relationships. . . . It crushes businesses with outrageous premiums. It mires thousands of injured workers in unproductive lives that spiral ever downward.”²⁴

Critics view such reportage not as expert but as advocacy journalism. They argue that this sort of opinionated reporting is precisely what has undermined public trust in the media. The evidence suggests otherwise, in that declining public trust in news organizations flows more from a general civic malaise than from particular practices of the media. Survey research has found that conservative Republicans—especially those who choose to listen to political talk radio—have the least trust in the media, but their complaint targets “liberal bias,” not a general decline in journalistic standards.²⁵

Well, is there such a bias? Ink has spilled like blood in the popular battle on this question, including Bernard Goldberg’s *Bias: A CBS Insider Exposes How the Media Distort the News* and Eric Alterman’s *What Liberal Media? The Truth About Bias and the News*. Such competing titles sell well and elicit hundreds of angry or fawning reviews on Amazon.com, which, at the time of this writing, offers its own tribute to balance by offering to sell the eager reader these two mutually incompatible books together, at a modest discount.

Academic research on the subject, fortunately, offers a relatively clear picture of where the “bias” lies. In a nutshell, it is the case that reporters are disproportionately liberal and tend to vote for Democrats, but there is no consistent partisan bias in the content of the mass media.²⁶ As for the partisanship of the rank-and-file reporter, one much-traveled radio and print correspondent has quipped, half-seriously, that “no conservative would work for what the average news job pays.”²⁷ The antiauthority stance of liberals may also explain their appetite for media jobs, which still offer the chance to question authorities and hold powerful officials and corporations accountable.

If the content of media is, on balance, well, balanced, what then explains the growing perception of liberal bias, a view held by only twelve percent of Americans in 1988 but espoused by forty-three percent in 1996. One explanation is that conservative cultural and political leaders have marshaled this critique as an effective means of inoculating conservative Americans against media critiques of Republican candidates and policies. A second reason is that increasing news coverage of the media itself, including hand-wringing about the charge of liberal bias, reinforces the credibility of the charge in the public’s mind.²⁸ The latter explanation offers a delicious irony: If one came to believe that the media were biased, owing to their own accounts of such bias, can one believe the accounts, given their source?

In any case, there is surely room in the larger media environment for explicitly liberal, conservative, and objective media outlets. The problem of bias only arises when a network, newspaper, or other entity poses as neutral but practices a decidedly partisan form of reporting. The clearest case of such an entity in the present media environment is Fox News Channel (FNC), which has successfully captured a conservative audience by framing news with a partisan point of view that is, despite occasional protestations to the contrary, obvious to even many of the network’s most devoted viewers. One media observer made the following comment in a comparison of FNC and the older Cable News Network (CNN):

Cable news networks appeal to two distinct audiences: highly ideological so-called news junkies whose daily entertainment derives from the overheated debates of the political class and a less-committed group who rely on experienced news gathering when a global crisis hits the headlines. CNN’s operation is designed as a resource for the latter; FNC’s for the former.²⁹

Broadcasting (and Shaping) the Public’s Voice

Even if the media, taken as a whole, lack a comprehensive partisan bias, they may still have a variety of effects on public opinion as a result of the issues they choose to cover and how they report on it. Political communication researchers

have found a variety of connections between the media and the public, from how the media set the public's agenda to how reporting on public opinion polls shape opinion itself.

AGENDA SETTING AND FRAMING

The simple premise of the agenda setting research program is that the media may not shape the public's views as much as they shape the public's agenda. Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw's study of the 1968 presidential election showed that when the media focused on an issue, media influenced the issues that appeared on the agendas of undecided voters.³⁰ After three decades of research, McCombs and Shaw concluded that the agenda setting theory holds true, and it is most clearly observed for those issues that "do not directly impact the lives of the majority of the public, such as foreign policy or government scandal."³¹ (Other actors, prominently including the government, shape the media's own agenda, but we save this important detail for Chapter 4.)

Researchers have made many significant modifications to the original model since its introduction. One such change is to distinguish between first level and second level agenda setting.³² A first level effect draws the public's attention to a particular issue or subject, such as when the media, following the lead of the Bush administration, put Afghanistan's rulers (the Taliban) on the American public's agenda following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. After the U.S. military removed the Taliban from power, the media then shifted the public's attention to Iraq, in another instance of a first level effect. Once focused on Iraq, however, the media also spurred a series of second level effects (influencing the public's attitudes on an issue) from "the Iraqi government supports terror" to "the Iraqi government is a threat to the security of the United States" to "the Iraqi government restricts the freedom of its citizens." In these ways, the media can not only put an issue on the public's agenda but also shape how we think about it. When this second level effect is understood as synonymous with a framing effect, it means the same thing as the media framing effects William Gamson found when studying political conversations, as described in the previous chapter.

One of the more powerful examples of agenda setting comes from Salma Ghanem's research on crime in Texas. From 1992–1994, crime went from being the principal concern of one in fifty Texans to more than one in three residents of the Lone Star State. As in most of the United States at that time, actual crime rates were dropping, but crime coverage in the news aired with increasing frequency. Looking at these trends over time, the increase in coverage appears to have spurred the increasing concern for a clear example of a first-level agenda-setting effect. In addition, however, news coverage of crime also had a second level effect by providing principally local coverage of robberies, murders, and

the like in a way that focused Texans' attention on those crimes that directly threaten the average person, as opposed to national or international criminal activity or crimes committed against governments or corporations.³³

Another helpful contribution to this literature comes from communication scholar Dietram Scheufele, who persuasively distinguished between media frames from individual frames. Journalists use media frames to organize and make sense of events, such as when a kidnapping is framed as part of the war on terror. Individuals also have frames, including global, cultural, or ideological ones and more issue-specific short-term ones. These cognitive frames help people process and make sense of media content, and they are often triggered by a parallel media frame.³⁴

Key influences on journalists' choice of media frames include the prevailing social norms of their society, pressures and constraints within their media organization, interest group pressures (such as the flak reporters often get from organized critics for using certain frames), the journalistic habits or routines they have developed over the years, and, finally, their own ideological or political orientations—or, at least as often, those of their editors.³⁵ In turn, the frames the media select can influence what readers, viewers, and listeners judge to be the most important aspects of a story, determine who they should credit or blame for events, and suggest who they should view as the victims or victors. Depending on how one frames a proposed tax cut, for instance, the proposal can sound like a fiscal windfall for the rich or a popular uprising to lighten the working family's tax burden. In the end, these media frames have the potential to shape even individual frames, as the repetition of a particular framing of a story (such as welfare reform) gradually leads individuals to spontaneously deploy the same frame when they try to make sense of related events in other media or in their personal experiences.

MIRROR MIRROR: POLLS AND IMPERSONAL INFLUENCE

Thus far, it would seem that the media determine—to a degree—which issues the public thinks about and how it thinks about them. But what happens when the media report the public's own voice through polling data? Political communication scholar Diana Mutz views this mediated interaction as a kind of mass society discussion: "Much of the deliberation that may once have occurred in face-to-face meetings of people with differing views may now occur in an individual's internalized conversation with generalized others."³⁶

Pre-election polls are one of the most common forms of survey data found in the media. These polls, among other things, can determine which candidates the public perceives as viable—capable of potentially winning an election. Mutz looked at the 1988 Democratic and Republican primaries to see whether a candidate's rising poll trends affected the candidate's fundraising fortunes. She

found that favorable polling results could, indeed, boost contributions to a candidate. The same results could reduce the flow of funds into a falling candidate's campaign coffers. Survey data suggest, however, that the changes in contributions reflected not the influence of the polls on readers' own preferences but rather an influence on the perceived value of making a donation to a candidate one already preferred. In other words, what I learn about fellow citizens' candidate preferences affects my strategic choices but not my own candidate preferences.³⁷

In an experimental study during the 1992 Democratic primary, Mutz found evidence of polls shaping opinions, but the impact was not of the kind one might expect. Participants in the study heard about recent polling data (the content of which was experimentally manipulated) and were then asked to state their candidate preference. Had you shown up in Mutz's laboratory, the following statements might have appeared on your questionnaire: "As you may have heard, some recent polls show that a large number of Democrats support Bill Clinton for the presidential nominee of the Democratic Party. How about you? Which of the candidates now in the running for the Democratic presidential nomination do you like best?" You would then choose your preference from a list of candidates and answer this follow-up question: "As you were thinking about your choice of candidate, what kinds of thoughts occurred to you?"

What predicted survey respondents' candidate preference was not just the nudge of the poll results but the combination of that information and their own thought processes. If a respondent had been leaning toward Clinton before hearing he was popular, then the poll numbers made the person even more likely to reflect on the reasons why others preferred Clinton. This in turn made the respondents that much more likely to express support for Clinton. If they initially leaned toward another candidate, such as Tom Harkin or Jerry Brown, the poll made them more likely to argue with the pro-Clinton poll results and reaffirm their initial leanings. This complex process was even stronger for those who were previously less concerned about the primary. In other words, the polling information did not serve as a consensus heuristic, whereby people blindly follow the lead of those surveyed to join what they perceive as a growing consensus view. Rather, the poll results prompted more reflection on one's own preferences, generally reinforcing previous inclinations.

After reviewing many findings of this sort, from both classroom experiments and national surveys, Mutz concluded that exposure to contrary points of view and different life experiences "does not automatically compel" people "to change their views." On the other hand, "when multiple others endorse a particular view, it is more likely to prompt a reassessment of their own positions in light of this new information. Thus, contrary to the conventional wisdom, impersonal influence need not be synonymous with empty-headed, sheeplike behavior or mass susceptibility to media influence." It could well result in "more reflective public opinion."³⁸

A SPIRAL OF SILENCE

A more dismal view of the effects of polling comes from the “spiral of silence” theory advanced by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann. This theory assumes that society functions as a collective, with individual members craving cohesion through a broad consensus on values and goals—what we commonly call public opinion.³⁹ Those who publicly “deviate from the consensus risk being ostracized by society—cast out as an unwelcome non-conformist.” This results in the following consequence:

If people believe that their opinions are shared in a consensus of public opinion, they have the confidence to speak out—whether in public or in private—displaying their convictions with buttons and bumper stickers, for instance, but also through the clothes they wear and other publicly visible symbols. When people feel they are in the minority, they become cautious and silent, thus further reinforcing the impression in public of their side’s weakness, until the apparently weaker side disappears completely except for a small hard core that clings to values from the past, or until the opinion becomes taboo.⁴⁰

Noelle-Neumann’s observations of the 1965 German federal elections inspired this theory of how polls can promote conformity. The two leading parties—the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats—were in a dead-heat in the months leading up to the election, but voters began to believe that the Christian Democrats were pulling away, though this was a misperception. In the final weeks before the election, this became a self-fulfilling prophecy, as voter preference, in fact, swung in the direction that voters mistakenly believed it had already swung, and the Christian Democrats won by nine percent.

A more contemporary example comes from a study of public discussion on a controversial ballot initiative on affirmative action that Washington voters considered in 1998. Researchers surveyed more than two hundred randomly selected passengers aboard the ferry across Puget Sound to and from Seattle. A careful analysis of the results found that, consistent with the spiral of silence theory, people were a bit less willing to discuss the affirmative action initiative if they had a more pronounced fear of isolation and if they perceived their view as unpopular. Contrary to the theory, however, what concerned the ferry passengers most was the fear of dissenting from the views of friends and family, not the larger collective of Washington voters.⁴¹

The balance of research on the spiral of silence produced results like those obtained on the ferry—general corroboration of the theory’s broadest claims but only weak effects and some contradictory findings, when one scrutinizes the details. A review of such studies by Dietram Scheufele and Patricia Moy suggested the need for many refinements and continued research.⁴² Two themes in their critique are the need to distinguish among individuals and among larger cultures.

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First, we know that individuals differ in their fear of isolation, their tendency to conform, and the strength of their convictions. It is likely that the effects of the spiral are quite strong for the person who is most fearful, most conformist, and least confident of his or her own views. Cultures that host a disproportionate number of such people are most likely to experience spirals of silence.

Second, one is most likely to see the spiral occur when issues with a moral dimension arise. This likely reflects the fact that individuals identify themselves with culturally like-minded people who principally share a set of values or core beliefs about how society should organize itself.⁴³ It follows that for people with a strong cultural identity, the relevant reference group is their cultural group—not society as a whole or, necessarily, their friends and acquaintances. We may overlook the spiral of silence's effect within a given political-cultural group, such as passionate libertarians, because we presume them to hold identical views. Such within-group similarity, however, is likely not just a consequence of like-minded people finding one another but also a result of group members choosing to conform to what they perceive as the view of their peers. After all, when a new issue arises, such as the limits on civil liberties in the Patriot Act or the ethics of regulating stem cell research funding, members of a culture arrive at a policy consensus that ensures its continued existence as a cohesive reference group.

A SPIRAL OF CYNICISM

If the media can contribute to a spiral of silence, ultimately foreclosing public deliberation on an issue, it follows that media could have other cascading effects. One particular impact that has received scholarly attention is the potential for the media to erode the public's willingness to trust public officials, government institutions, and even each other.

Communication researchers Patricia Moy and Michael Pfau addressed this issue in their book *With Malice Toward All? The Media and Public Confidence in Democratic Institutions*.⁴⁴ This work included a review of diverse literatures bearing on the link between trust in public institutions and exposure to different media sources. Their original research combined a content analysis of media with survey data from 1995 to 1997, and their conclusions contradicted the view that declining public trust is a straightforward consequence of negative media coverage. On the contrary, Moy and Pfau presented evidence supporting their theory that media can, under specific circumstances, actually bolster the public's confidence in its institutions. For instance, television news viewing had a positive impact on the public's views of the news media and public schools. Reading newspapers contributed to relatively favorable assessments of the much-maligned criminal justice and public school systems.

More disappointing findings, however, come from Joseph Cappella and Kathleen Hall Jamieson's *Spiral of Cynicism: The Press and the Public Good*.⁴⁵ Like

Moy and Pfau, they were concerned with the media's effect on how the public sees people and institutions, and their work returns us to the earlier discussion of framing. What they contrasted were substantive versus "strategic" news frames on issues and candidates. A substantive framing on a story about Bill Clinton's health care proposal, for example, would emphasize the details of the policy, its likely consequences, and the alternatives. In other words, such a story would be designed to promote the very deliberative process detailed at the start of this chapter. A strategic frame, by contrast, would emphasize how the health proposal fits into the larger political contest between Democrats and Republicans. The story does not help the reader understand the proposal so much as grasp its political costs and benefits for partisan interests. Similarly, during an election, a strategic frame emphasizes the "horse race" among the candidates, rather than the substantive, philosophical, and relevant character differences between them.

Cappella and Jamieson conducted a series of experiments and surveys to assess the effects of strategic news frames on public attitudes, and they found that even a single news story can cause a reader to attribute cynical motives to the public officials in a news story. The cumulative effect of such strategic stories is additive, in that each adds an increment of cynicism to the reader's own understanding (and retelling) of current events. Moreover, such cynicism can do real harm to the deliberative process. In the case of Clinton's health care proposal, its demise can be explained partly due to a chain of effects starting with strategic media coverage. The cynical framing led citizens to attribute negative traits to the proposal's sponsors, which triggered broader cynicism and mistrust, which then led to a rejection of the plan—not on its merits as a policy solution but owing to a media-amplified distrust of public officials.

Strategic frames can also have a beneficial effect by making the substantive issues of a policy debate more interesting and engaging, helping media users understand the political process, and increasing political sophistication overall. Nonetheless, to the extent that media make people unwilling to consider public officials' arguments, unable to conceive of public-spirited behavior, and uninterested in the deeper substance of political conflicts, they undermine the potential for mediated deliberation.

TALK RADIO AND PUBLIC VOICE

Not all media, however, speak *to* the public. Long before the advent of interactive online media, call-in radio programs popularized the practice of speaking *with* the public. Political talk radio has won a large and devoted listenership. Although a 2000 review of top-rated programs found the medium overwhelmed by the conservative voices of Rush Limbaugh and his imitators,⁴⁶ Al Franken and investors created the Air America radio network in 2004 in an attempt to create a space for liberals to hear liberals on the air.

To some extent, political talk radio programs do nothing more than recycle the news and information already circulating in the mainstream media. Listening to one or another of these programs, one gets to hear headlines read from the morning paper, extended quotes from op-eds and opinionated Web sites, and interviews with guests who have just arrived in the studio after appearing earlier that morning on the television.

What makes talk radio worthy of special mention, however, is its open broadcast of interaction between the host and the listener—something talk radio foregrounds but other media, by contrast, only occasionally feature (or mimic in the more controlled output of a public opinion survey). This creates the potential for the mass public to hear itself, via the talk radio broadcast. In effect, talk radio permits the rabble to rouse itself.

This function is important because even advocates of representative deliberation acknowledge that professional communicators, no matter how well intentioned, often fail to fulfill their responsibilities to produce a deliberative media system. More radical critics have pointed out that the mass media, intellectual elites, and public officials often pursue agendas that conflict with the public's interest.⁴⁷ Benjamin Page, who popularized the notion of mediated deliberation, recognized one problem in particular:

The most prominent journalists, television commentators, and public officials tend to have much higher incomes than the average American and to live in very different circumstances. On certain class-related issues, it seems possible that these professional communicators may interpret events in ways that do not take the public's values into account and may recommend policies contrary to those values.⁴⁸

When elites share such similar orientations and backgrounds, mass deliberation often fails, such as when the United States has a "bipartisan foreign policy." Under these circumstances, the public often remains unaware of an important issue or its ramifications for the general population.⁴⁹

Even in these situations, the mass media might solve their own problems by providing alternative communication outlets, such as the talk radio medium mentioned earlier. To illustrate the importance of this form of public voice, Page offered the example of the Zoe Baird nomination. President Clinton nominated Baird for U.S. attorney general, and her confirmation appeared likely, despite the revelation that she and her husband had hired two illegal aliens to help with driving and baby-sitting. The criticisms of Baird flowed through call-in radio programs that encouraged discussion of current issues. Callers to programs across the country were outraged that a lawbreaker would serve as the highest-ranking law-enforcement official. Though elites sympathetically sided with Baird's decision, the general public did not. As one Boston talk show host remarked, "I don't think the average schmo says, 'Hey, I know 15 people who have Peruvian live-in nannies.'" Baird's bipartisan support thus eroded, and

Clinton withdrew his nomination after a firestorm of public opposition. Though some might have suspected a behind-the-scenes orchestration of public outcry, evidence suggests that the criticism of Baird was a case of genuine popular backlash.⁵⁰

If talk radio is an important forum for the expression of the public's voice, the next question concerns who takes part in this form of discussion. Though the overwhelming majority of its hosts are conservative, talk radio's listeners appear to be somewhat more diverse. Long before the arrival of the liberal talk radio network Air America, one comprehensive survey of national talk radio audiences found a profile that defies the stereotype of the white, male, and conservative "ditto-head."⁵¹ A survey of radio listeners in San Diego, California, found that the listening frequency of talk radio was unrelated to every major demographic variable.⁵² In other words, talk radio listeners come from all bands of the demographic and political spectrum, even though talk radio listenership certainly over-represents conservatives. Research also suggests that those listeners who call talk radio programs come from diverse backgrounds, though callers typically have exceptional levels of political self-confidence.⁵³

Regardless of the host or the audience, the talk radio format that has taken hold in American political culture does not permit the kind of deliberative discussion described in Chapter 2. No popular program currently attracts listeners through the to-and-fro of honest political debate between intellectual equals. More common is the sort of staged or false debate decried by Jon Stewart in the opening of this chapter. Even then, talk radio may serve a function in a larger deliberative media system by giving the public a venue to vent frustrations overlooked even by the ever-watchful political parties and pundits, who make it their job to anticipate public opinion trends. The more emotionally charged talk shows, including even the outrageous antics on *The Jerry Springer Show*, can also permit frank public testimony and moral debate that otherwise do not occur in an overly polite public debate.⁵⁴

Visions of a More Deliberative Media

It is possible to imagine a more unambiguously deliberative media process, whereby the media produce richer content and citizens play a less passive role in consuming it. This chapter concludes with a glimpse at three promising ideas and practices—public journalism, watchdogs and blogs, and microjournalism.

PUBLIC JOURNALISM

When Jay Rosen wrote "Public Journalism: First Principles" in 1994, the public journalism movement had already begun to take off. This new form of journalism (sometimes called civic journalism) includes a wide range of goals

and purposes, but, in essence, it “tries to place the journalist within the political community as a responsible member with a full stake in public life. . . . In a word, public journalists want public life to work,” and they are no longer neutral on basic democratic questions, such as whether people participate in public life, “whether a genuine debate takes place when needed,” and “whether a community comes to grips with its problems.”⁵⁵

Among the early successes of public journalism, Rosen counted the following:

- Three newspapers had “redesigned their coverage to emphasize the concerns of citizens rather than the maneuvers of candidates or the machinations of insiders” (Wichita Eagle, Charlotte Observer, and Tallahassee Democrat).
- Some had played the role of community organizer by sponsoring “neighborhood roundtables that encourage citizens to meet in private homes to discuss public issues” (Portland Herald Press, Minneapolis Star-Tribune).
- Others “convened discussions among local leaders in communities where there was no movement or momentum” (Daily Oklahoman, Boulder Daily Camera).⁵⁶

The movement has had considerable success in the years since. Many observers share the view of political scientist Albert Dzur, who declared in 2002 that “public journalism is arguably the most significant reform movement in American journalism since the Progressive era.”⁵⁷ Dzur added that public journalism, from its inception, was “influenced by the ideals of deliberative democracy” and principally “advocates changes in techniques of newsgathering and reporting to foster more public deliberation.”⁵⁸

One of the many examples of public journalism is the efforts undertaken by the *Tallahassee Democrat*. The State of Florida has been the butt of many jokes since it bungled the 2000 presidential election, but this Tallahassee paper has been a source of pride for its readers. The *Democrat*, working with a TV station and two local universities, initiated the Public Agenda project, which began with a series of surveys and focus groups to learn which issues most concerned the wider Tallahassee community. The *Democrat* then used the results of these studies to frame a series of professionally moderated public meetings that included community leaders, civic organization members, and the general public. These general meetings led to the formation of subgroups focusing on key issue clusters, such as “Jobs and the Economy” and “Children, Values, and Education.” In parallel, the *Democrat* created the Public Agenda Page, an online forum that collected citizen comments, hosted open discussions and question-and-answer periods with public officials, and created a progress report on each issue.⁵⁹

Today, the Public Journalism Network brings together a diverse group of print and electronic media organizations that share the same general goal of connecting with the public they serve and promoting not just media deliberation but also the kinds of conversations, discussions, and public meetings described throughout this book. Figure 3.2 shows the declaration of the network’s charter

members, and the language of that document makes it clear that these journalists believe they can maintain objectivity on the substance of the issues they cover (e.g., “journalists should stand apart in making sound professional judgments about how to cover communities”), but they also believe that they must “adhere to democratic discipline” in their reporting and editing.

**A declaration written by the Charter
Members of the Public Journalism
Network in Kennesaw, Georgia, January 25, 2003.**

The Public Journalism Network is a global professional association of journalists and educators interested in exploring and strengthening the relationship between journalism and democracy.

We believe journalism and democracy work best when news, information and ideas flow freely; when news fairly portrays the full range and variety of life and culture of all communities; when public deliberation is encouraged and amplified; and when news helps people function as political actors and not just as political consumers.

We believe journalists should stand apart in making sound professional judgments about how to cover communities, but cannot stand apart in learning about and understanding these communities.

We believe the diversity and fragmentation of society call for new techniques for storytelling and information-sharing to help individual communities define themselves singularly and as part of the whole set of communities.

We believe the stories and images journalists produce can help or hinder as people struggle to reach sound judgments about their personal lives and their common well-being.

We believe we must articulate a public philosophy for journalism that helps journalists reach deeper into the communities they serve and that helps communities work more closely with the journalists who serve them.

We believe democracy benefits when journalists listen to the people.

We believe we can learn and grow as practitioners, educators and scholars—and strengthen practice, education and scholarship—by examining, experimenting with and enhancing the theory and practice of journalism in relation to the theory and practice of democracy.

We believe in the value of studying the dynamics of communities and the complexity of public life. Just as journalists need to adhere to professional and financial discipline to succeed, we believe they must adhere to democratic discipline.

We believe the best journalism helps people see the world as a whole and helps them take responsibility for what they see.

Figure 3.2 A Declaration for Public Journalism

SOURCE: Public Journalism Network.(Charter available online at www.pjnet.org/charter.shtml.)
Used by permission.

Critics of the public journalism movement worry that it threatens the independence or freedom of the media. Part of what makes private media so valuable in a democracy is that they exist apart from the government and the public. Reporters cherish their “autonomy” or “detachment” because it gives them the freedom to report candidly on issues, no matter how uncomfortable they might make power holders, or the lay public for that matter. As journalism professor Michael McDevitt explained, it is one thing to make a “valid criticism of conventional detachment”—the tendency of journalists to become disengaged from the public’s concerns—but this does not “constitute a rationale for questioning the basis of journalistic authority itself.”⁶⁰

This, like many critiques of public journalism, is really more of a warning to not take the idea too far—beyond a renewed concern for sustaining deliberation to becoming a public servant, catering to the whims and prejudices of a community rather than challenging it to meet the same standards one sets for one’s own newsroom. Public journalism, in this sense, asks that if the media meet their deliberative obligations as media producers, as described in the central column of Figure 3.1, then the public too must meet its own responsibilities, shown in the right-hand column of the same figure.

In an ideal community, focusing on one’s role as a deliberative media producer may mean relinquishing some of the more secondary responsibilities that media like the *Tallahassee Democrat* have accepted. The media must play the role of “deliberative-democratic watchdog”—an outside critic not only of public officials but also of citizens and the very kinds of discussions and meetings that the *Democrat* has promoted. After all, in a mature, deliberative community, like those envisioned in Chapter 8 of this book, the media would have responsibility for determining “what and who is left out of public discussions and official decisions.”⁶¹

WATCHDOGS AND BLOGS

The metaphor of media as watchdog is an old one, but some media have given new life to this cliché by suggesting ways in which they can keep a watchful eye on themselves. One of the means they have deployed is the Weblog or blog, which is nothing more than a diary-style Web site with commentary and links concerning a stream of topics or current events.

Along these very lines, in 2005 CBS News launched PublicEye, the self-proclaimed aim of which is to “bring transparency to the editorial operations of CBS News.”⁶² To be transparent in this context means to make one’s news-making processes visible, subject to outside scrutiny, and, ultimately, more accountable. If PublicEye makes CBS truly transparent, CBS news will make its activities visible for anyone who cares to watch.

What prompted CBS to launch PublicEye was the effectiveness of independent blogs—the public’s own unappointed (and unleashed) watchdogs. Just two

months before the 2004 presidential election, the CBS News program *60 Minutes II* presented an in-depth report alleging that President George W. Bush received “preferential treatment” while serving light duty in the Texas Air National Guard. The story was an old one, but what made this news was the presence of four previously unseen memos, including the one shown in Figure 3.3.

Shortly after the story aired, the memos were proved to be forged. The first attack on the CBS story appeared on the blog FreeRepublic.com, authored by an active Air Force officer. A succession of other blogs picked up and elaborated the story, including Republican sites such as rathergate.com, a blog registered to the Republican consultant Richard Viguerie. As recounted by journalist Corey Pein in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, the ensuing fracas was not entirely deliberative. It is not clear, in the end, whether the blogs helped CBS News get the story right. For instance, one of the principal arguments establishing the memos as inauthentic was the presence of the superscript characters “th,” which numerous blogs alleged could not be produced on typewriters in the 1970s (when the memos were allegedly typed). Though others knowledgeable of that era’s technology refuted that claim, it stuck. All the blogging in the world could not undo the power of this and similar “definitive” evidence of fraud. Moreover, the debate over the memos distracted the public’s attention from the point of the story, which was that a preponderance of evidence suggests that President Bush did not fulfill the full requirements of his service in the National Guard.⁶³

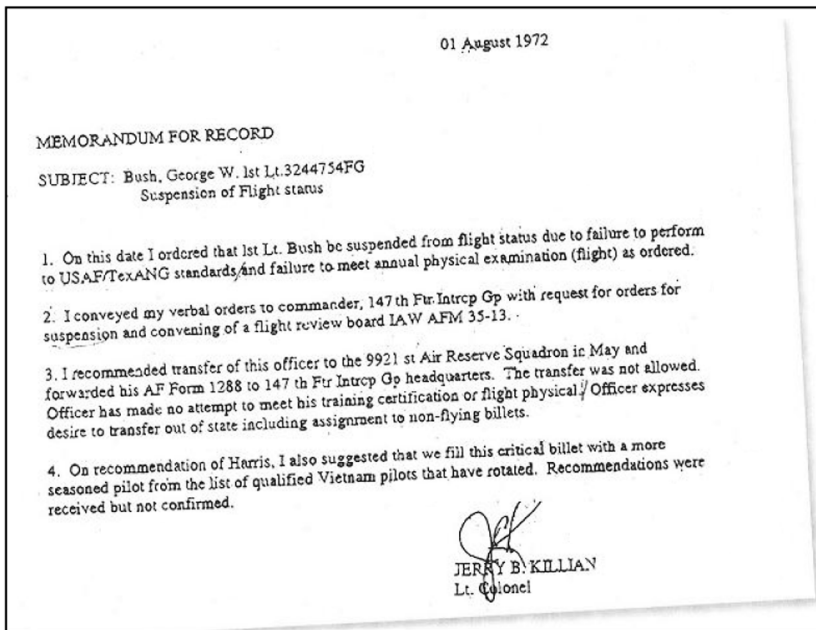


Figure 3.3 The Memo That Brought Down Dan Rather

The high political stakes of this particular episode may have resulted in a more muddled outcome than is commonly the case. A recent study of those who read blogs found that many Internet users have become devoted to regularly reading blogs “devoted to critiquing media coverage.” Bloggers in this tradition “routinely fact check stories in traditional media and gleefully point out errors.” An irony of these Web sites is that “because most bloggers are not independent newsgatherers, they must rely heavily on the Web for their content.” Consequently, “much of that comes from the traditional media”—the very same outlets that bloggers critique. Moreover, bloggers seeking credibility “often try to lend authority to their sites by providing links to traditional media sites.”⁶⁴ Even those who regularly read blogs can recognize the limits of a Weblog: although seventy-two percent rated the blogs they read as moderately or very in-depth in their coverage, only fifty percent gave them such a rating on accuracy, and only thirty-eight percent gave a similar rating on fairness.⁶⁵

Though it may be stretching the metaphor too far, we might view blogs as true watchdogs of the deliberative scrap yard, in that they do, indeed, keep a keen eye out for intruders who wish to do our democracy harm, but they are also often junkyard dogs—mean-spirited, free-roaming, likely feral canines who thirst for a bite of leg or arm, regardless of the virtue of those who cross their path. In the larger media system, there is a place for such reportage, but blogs are largely dependent on mainstream media and old-fashioned investigative reporting. In the end, blogs are more likely to complement media than replace them.

MICROJOURNALISM AND THE RESURGENCE OF LOCALISM

One of the irreplaceable features of mainstream media is their coverage of daily events. In particular, while the wire services and national media cover our nation and the world, it is the local newspapers and television that keep us current on the events in our cities and towns. The simple act of reading the local newspaper on a regular basis makes a citizen more likely to participate in local politics, remain aware of local issues, and develop passionate convictions about local issues.⁶⁶

The notion that local media matter has deep roots in the media system. Localism is one of the values that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is chartered to uphold. The deregulation of the media system to permit greater concentration of ownership, however, has reduced the amount of local control and programming at many media outlets. Even the highly regarded system of National Public Radio (NPR) stations has reconceptualized “local” as a notion that transcends geographic borders, with local stations offering national programming that speaks to the issues and concerns of national communities rather than local ones.⁶⁷

An alternative media tradition persists, however, and stridently local “community” or “grassroots” radio stations (along with some NPR affiliates) continue

to produce locally grown programs that focus on the lives of people within their broadcast coverage. These stations can stimulate and enliven current public debates, along the lines of public journalism, and they can also serve an educational function by giving their numerous volunteers the chance to hone their own reporting and broadcasting skills.⁶⁸

If local journalism is good for the local community, would neighborhood journalism be good for the neighborhood? One enterprising team of journalists presumed the answer was yes, and they set out to report on their block. From 1995–1997, Albuquerque residents Cindy Simmons, Todd Wynward, Peg Bartlett, and I put out *The Truman Trumpet*, a very irregular newspaper devoted to covering the news and events that happened on our block. A stray cat, a stolen car, a new shed—nothing was too small to cover—and much of the coverage was done in the same hard news tradition of the *New York Times*. The results were sometimes hilarious, but the paper had the effect of making the block feel real and alive to its residents, many of whom had lived there for decades but had fallen out of the habit of conversing with their next-door neighbors.

When Cindy Simmons moved to Seattle in 1998, she continued this experiment by starting the *Wallingford Word*, a free newspaper that she circulated quasi-monthly for four years. The *Word* reached out to a wider community—an urban Seattle neighborhood with a mix of residences and businesses covering perhaps a single square mile—than did *The Truman Trumpet*. The goal remained the same—to help a neighborhood take itself seriously by looking very closely at its local problems and successes. Figure 3.4 shows the front page from one of the final issues of the *Word*. The feature stories examine three of the transportation options Wallingford residents have when trying to get to downtown Seattle during rush hour. The subject is serious, but the writing is lighthearted and accessible.⁶⁹ The other cover story addresses an upcoming election for the Wallingford Community Council, a quasi-governmental organization that often has great difficulty inspiring enough people to run for its offices, let alone enough participants to spark a lively debate on neighborhood issues.

Simmons refers to efforts like these as microjournalism. If the future of deliberative media includes public journalism and bloggers, it is also likely to include many microjournalists in the tradition of *The Truman Trumpet* and the *Wallingford Word*. As more people go online, neighborhood news sites become an increasingly viable option for those who wish to reach their readers at minimum expense. Nonetheless, there will likely always be a place for the hand-distributed newsletter because the periodic doorstep meetings between oneself and one's neighbor promote a kind of connection that is unique to the face-to-face encounter.

Taken to its extreme, in fact, microjournalism draws a connection from the practices of mass media institutions all the way down to informal news networks among friends, coworkers, and community members. Sociologist Herbert Gans observed that even when “neighbors pass along the latest block gossip” through

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The Great Wallingford Bus Race

What's the fastest way to get downtown at rush hour? Enquiring minds need to know. So five intrepid Wallingford Word reporters met at 8 a.m. one Thursday at the intersection of 45th and Wallingford to race to Pioneer Square. Did the tortoise Metro beat the swift-but-time-wasting hare of a station wagon? Read on to find out.

Riding the 26 Bus

By Cindy Simmons

It's 8 a.m. on a rainy Thursday. Too early for a telecommuter like me to be outside, but if hundreds of thousands of downtown workers have to wake up early to fight through traffic every weekday, I can do it once in the name of science.

John and I hop around on the corner of Wallingford and 45th to keep warm. Tracy and her reporter-in-training kids drive up.

Our goal is to determine the fastest way to get downtown from Wallingford. Since Tracy's kids didn't bring coats, they get to take their station wagon. It's raining, so none of our bicyclists show up. I draw the short straw and have to walk five blocks to get the 26.

It's 8:13 when we split up. I can actually see John's 16 pulling up in front of Bartel's. But I'm not jealous. This is science. And besides, I've got a secret weapon.

The walk down Wallingford is undoubtedly the most beautiful view of the Seattle skyline. At 43rd, a man is standing on his front walk, transfixed by the rain clouds moving over the city. I admire the gardens as I speed along. On the east side of the street, someone has cemented a Barbie doll into the sidewalk. I love

(Continued on page 2)

Driving the Kids

By Tracy Homoser

I arrive 8:05 a.m. with my two coatless children at Wallingford and 45th. We're given the task to drive downtown to Pioneer Square and rendezvous at the desecrated Pergola. I accept with great gusto, knowing full well that I can now return home immediately to grab my children's coats or risk being turned into the Department for Underdressed, Grossly Abused and Neglected Children.

Driving allows for more flexibility with timing and scheduling, which in turn allows more time for forgetting important items and lollygagging around. I spend 20 minutes driving back to the house, ushering children into the bathroom and grabbing coats.

We pass the starting point again at 8:35 a.m. and drive west to 99. Turn left onto the southbound lane and soon learn why traffic is so Quixotic in this lovely town of ours. We make great time over the bridge until we hit the slowdown midway past Westlake. While in the far left lane I notice the flashing lights above the Battery Tunnel. Too late to get over to the Seattle Center exit, I turn on NPR for the traffic report: 11 minutes before the hour (Why don't they just wait one minute for 10 ill?) and

(Continued on page 2)



The 16 bus returns to base, defeated by traffic.

Trapped on the 16

By John Gastil

Victory was surely mine. All I had to do to win the Great Wallingford Bus Race was walk twenty yards to a waiting 16 bus, sit peacefully for a few minutes, then disembark and walk a few blocks to Pioneer Square.

The 16 glides through Wallingford with ease, picking up grateful commuters at the usual

(Continued on page 2)

This Ain't Sleepy Hollow, But Wallingford Has a Headless Council Slate

By Cindy Simmons

Wallingford Community Council terms are set to expire next month, but at the April 4 board meeting, the nominating committee had no candidates for president or first vice president.

"Having people volunteer and having people participate in the community council has become progressively more difficult," said Barbara Reine, who was elected first vice president last year, but moved up to president after Karen Buschow had to resign.

Reine said she would prefer not to take on another term at the top.

"I just retired," she said. "I'm hoping for a short time to have a window of less responsibility."

Steve Cyr, who is currently third vice president, said the presidency takes 15 to 20 hours per week. Cyr said he doesn't have that much time, but he, Reine and Buschow are negotiating some type of shared power arrangement.

While the Community Council has a vampiric need for new blood, the slate makers feel

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Figure 3.4 A Front Page From the *Wallingford Word*

SOURCE: Cindy Simmons. Used by permission.

everyday conversations, they are acting as unpaid reporters. "If journalism is defined as the gathering and reporting of new information to an audience," Gans pointed out, "we are all journalists."⁷⁰ Of course, the average person has neither the tools nor reach of media professionals who work within vast media organizations. The point here is simply to recognize the potential for lay citizens to informally distribute and analyze their own news outside of the larger media system.

Conclusion

There is no national scorecard on how well the media promote a kind of mass deliberation, nor is there an inventory of how often individual citizens, as a

result of media consumption, have conversations within their head that might look like deliberation. We do know that the public remains largely ignorant or confused about many important facts about their political—and larger—world.⁷¹ We also know that most citizens do not feel sufficiently aroused by the issues in their community, nation, and world to engage in ongoing political action.⁷²

This suggests that we can do better. A more public-oriented journalism, coupled with a diverse proliferation of bloggers and microjournalists, would likely improve the deliberative quality of the larger media system. For professional media organizations leery of a full commitment to the credo of public journalism or the lawlessness of the blogosphere, a middle way may be simply demanding that public institutions give satisfactory reasons for their actions that comport with basic social values, such as justice and fairness. Communication professor James Ettema proposed this approach in his essay “Journalism as Reason Giving.” A single media organization can combine objective reporting on an issue with uncovering the issue’s moral dimensions and, through its editorial capacity, staking out a position in light of the findings of its investigations. Ettema wrote:

[Journalism] must itself be a reasoning institution that aggressively pursues, rigorously tests, and compellingly renders reasons that satisfy the key criterion of deliberative democracy. If journalism ought to encourage debate . . . and hold governors accountable . . . , then we must ask journalism to not merely record the processes of deliberation but also to act as a reasoning participant in those processes. We must ask journalism to embrace a further paradox: to function as both a fair-minded moderator and a committed speaker.⁷³

Taking this, or any other more deliberative orientation, could engender profound changes. Whether deliberative or not, our media frame the issues we think about and how we think about them. Of particular importance, the media prove a critical conduit through which we debate the issues and candidates that come before us each election cycle. It is this issue that captures our attention in the following chapter.

Notes

1. Scholars have begun to look at *The Daily Show* as signaling a new form of political reporting, blending news and entertainment in a way that holds the attention of younger viewers while delivering real substance and even complex understandings of news and current events (Baym, 2005). The program also inspired a spirited discussion panel at the National Communication Association annual conference in 2006.
2. Grossberg (2005).
3. Peters (2001, p. 2).
4. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

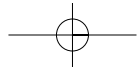
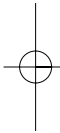
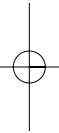
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5. Giddens (1984, p. 236).
6. Page (1996, p. 5).
7. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
8. Habermas (2006, p. 416).
9. *Ibid.*
10. Goodin (2000, p. 96).
11. Quoted in McKinley (2005, p. B1).
12. Goodin and Niemeyer (2003) found evidence of such internal reflection in the case of citizen juries held in Australia.
13. Just, Levine, and Regan (2002, p. 102).
14. *Ibid.*, p. 102.
15. For CBS's own admission of error, see <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/09/08/60II/main641984.shtml>.
16. For more on the fate of investigative reporting, see Greenwald and Bernt (2000).
17. Klein (2001, p. 134).
18. Page (1996, pp. 21–26).
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 26–35.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
22. Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston (forthcoming).
23. Newman (1993, pp. 12–13).
24. *Ibid.*
25. Jones (2004). See also Lee (2005).
26. Lee (2005, pp. 43–44) summarized a long list of such studies.
27. Cindy Simmons, quoted in personal correspondence.
28. Watts, Domke, Shah, and Fan (1999) and Domke, Watts, Fan, and Shah (1999).
29. Farhi (2003, pp. 32–33).
30. McCombs and Shaw (1972).
31. Weaver, McCombs, and Shaw (2004, p. 258).
32. *Ibid.*, p. 259.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 262.
34. Scheufele (1999, pp. 106–7).
35. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
36. Mutz (1998, p. 295).
37. *Ibid.*, pp. 246–58.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
39. Habermas (2006) aptly noted that the phrase *public opinion* is a “singular phrase” that “only refers to the prevailing one among several public opinions” (p. 417).
40. Noelle-Neumann (1991, p. 259).
41. Moy, Domke, and Stamm (2001).
42. Scheufele and Moy (2000).
43. Gastil, Kahan, and Braman (2005).
44. Moy and Pfau (2000).
45. Cappella and Jamieson (1997).
46. Gastil (2000, pp. 103–5). Much of the text in this section is adapted from Gastil (2000, pp. 101–6).
47. Herman and Chomsky (1988) demonstrated how different “news filters” can result in biased coverage, even when reporters intend to report faithfully on world affairs.
48. Page (1996, p. 10).

49. Ibid., p. 119. See also Bennett et al. (in press).
50. Quotation and observations are from Page (1996, p. 89). He drew on stories written in the *Boston Globe*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, and *Washington Post*.
51. The survey was conducted by *Talkers Magazine* (Longmeadow, Massachusetts), which updates the survey every six months online at <http://www.talkers.com/talkaud.html>. The term *ditto-head* comes from Rush Limbaugh, who uses the term without irony to refer to his listeners, who often offer “dittos” to Limbaugh. After listening to the Rush Limbaugh radio show, this begins to sound like a devoted incantation, recited by the most loyal listeners.
52. Hofstetter et al. (1994, pp. 474–76).
53. Newhagen (1994). The study did not suggest a single causal direction, and it is plausible that calling shows may heighten self-efficacy, as well as vice versa. Hofstetter et al. (1994) found the same relationship. Also see Hollander (1997), who found that talk radio has likely helped to mobilize conservative voters in the United States.
54. Lunt and Stenner (2005) provided just such an analysis of *Springer*, pointing out the less-than-obvious ways in which the show embodies the Habermasian ideal of a deliberative public sphere. When evaluating programs such as this, it is important to distinguish between requiring a particular program to model deliberation, per se, and asking that a program contribute to a larger societal-level debate—a deliberative media system, in which there is always room for the occasional polemic or extreme emotional outburst. As a side note, on the Air America radio network, Jerry Springer currently hosts a radio program that sounds more reflective and dialogic than most talk radio. In other words, it appears that Springer can consciously craft a variety of discursive spaces—not just the spectacle that is his infamous television program. Current information on the program is available at <http://www.airamerica.com>.
55. Rosen and Merritt (1994, p. 11).
56. Ibid., p. 9. Rosen (2001) updated this optimistic view of public journalism and explained the movement more fully.
57. Dzur (2002, p. 313).
58. Ibid.
59. Ibid., pp. 317–18.
60. McDevitt (2003, p. 162).
61. Dzur (2002, p. 335).
62. Dorroh (2005, p. 14).
63. Pein (2005). Note that Pein can embrace the irony of having his own blog, coreypein.com. He wrote, “I know the site looks like a blog. This sort of annoys me, because ninety-eight percent of blogs are crap. So, I guess, is ninety-eight percent of what’s published anywhere, but blogs, to an extent heretofore unseen, encourage self-obsession and useless rambling. Before I go too far down that road, I must stop typing” (<http://coreypein.com/2004/06/introduction.html>).
64. Johnson and Kaye (2004, p. 625).
65. Ibid., p. 629.
66. Scheufele, Shanahan, and Kim (2002). See also McLeod et al. (1996). These impacts have limits, however. McLeod, Scheufele, and Moy (1999) found that the effect of local newspaper and television use extended to conventional, institutionalized participation (only indirectly for television) but not to participation in local forums, such as those described in Chapter 2.

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67. Stavitsky (1994).
68. Forde, Meadows, and Foxwell (2003).
69. An earlier *Word* story on the potential elimination of Bus 26 may have helped save that bus line, whose riders spoke up after reading the story.
70. Gans (2007, p. 161).
71. Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996).
72. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995).
73. Ettema (2007, p. 145).



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