

The Forum

Volume 3, Issue 1

2005

Article 1

The Media: What They Are Today, and How They Got That Way

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The Media: What They Are Today, and How They Got That Way*

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Abstract

This article seeks to provide a historical context for the current state of the media. It concludes that the political bias, and capacity to produce journalistic scandal, so conspicuous in recent years among leading newspapers and television networks, reflects the impact of major cultural, market, and technological developments.

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The troubled state of this country's major institutions is a familiar feature of our time. The presidency has been battered by Vietnam, Watergate, and Monicagate, Congress by disgraced Speakers and low public esteem. A good-sized chunk of corporate America--Enron and its numerous siblings; misbehaving banks and investment firms; product-besmirched cigarette and auto manufacturers--has come under a similar cloud. American universities, arguably the world's best (certainly the best-endowed) are under attack for political correctness, grade and cost inflation, and faculty dereliction of duty. Organized religion has been rocked by misbehaving evangelical leaders and Catholic priests. Only the military, which underwent its own dark night of the soul in the Vietnam era, can lay claim to an uptick in character and reputation.

The media have joined the ranks of the fallen. A Gallup poll in May 2003 found that 62 percent of respondents thought that news organizations were often inaccurate. It was not always so. During the mid- and late twentieth century, major American papers and TV networks were highly regarded for the scope and objectivity of their news coverage, and for their role as the nation's moral watchdogs toward McCarthyism, the civil rights movement, Vietnam, and Watergate. But a multitude of scandals in more recent years has tarnished their reputations.

The media, it seems, are reaping the costs of the same Faustian bargain that has wounded other major American institutions. Society has rising expectations of its leading newspapers and television networks, as it has of its presidents, Congress, corporations, and universities. But this has a cost. When those expectations are not met--when hubris reaps its inevitable harvest--the public reaction is commensurately stronger.

But before leaping to these conclusions, it would be well to step back and ask --and try to answer--a few questions:

Is it indeed the case that the current state of media accuracy and objectivity is unusually suspect? Or is it pretty much what it always has been?

If in fact there has been a spike in media misbehavior, what is its cause: isolated instances of that random x-factor human frailty? Or is there a larger, more systemic problem?

To my delight, these questions lend themselves to the methods and mind-set of the historian. That is not often the case in public policy discourse, where an historical perspective is measured in months or at most a decade, and other forms of analysis--statistical, theoretical, anecdotal--are more favored.

I

Journalism by nature is contentious, sharp-edged, opinionated. Gossip, sensationalism, and exposure are essential ways of getting readers to read, or

viewers to view, the media product. From their first appearance in the eighteenth century, newspapers were organs with attitude. In colonial America, as in Old Regime Europe, they depended on the support of wealthy individuals or factions, and reflected the take-no-prisoners mentality of their patrons. At the very beginning of the Republic, in 1789, Alexander Hamilton financed John Fenno's *Gazette of the United States* "to endear the general Government to the people." Two years later Thomas Jefferson riposted with Philip Freneau's *National Gazette*. Soon after, Benjamin Franklin Bache (the great man's grandson) and English radical William Duane made their *American Aurora* a virulent Republican organ--matched scurrility for scurrility by William Cobbett's Federalist *Porcupine's Gazette*.

No-holds-barred partisanship hardly subsided as American public life become more democratic in the nineteenth century. Almost all newspapers were wedded to and to some degree subsidized by the parties. Their readership expanded with the democratization of the electorate and the spread of literacy. The Post Office Act of 1792 subsidized newspaper delivery rates, and Congress created a dense national network of post offices. By 1840 39 million copies of newspapers were distributed annually. Popular newspaper names--*Post*, *Express*, *Mail*, *Courier*, *Dispatch*--suggest how important the postal system was to the American press.

A mass audience, along with new technology--faster presses, cheaper paper--led to new kinds of journalism. James Gordon Bennett's *New York Herald* and Richard Henry Dana's *Sun*, which appeared in the 1830s, innovatively avoided too-close identification with a political party. They depended for their income instead on large circulation and substantial advertising, earned by their low price of a penny and their crime-and-sex-drenched news pages.

During the last half of the nineteenth century, another significant audience began to appear: a commercial-professional urban middle class that saw itself as above mass party politics, and wanted a more responsible and objective approach to the news. Editors ambitious to shape public opinion responded. As Whitelaw Reid of the *New York Tribune* put it, truthful independent journalism would make the newspaper "the master, not the tool, of party."

Yet another addition to what would become the world of the modern media was the marriage of sensationalism and reform. Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst, the most successful American newspaper publishers at the turn of the twentieth century, understood that in an urban, industrial society, profits and crusading journalism could be comfortable bedfellows. But exposés and objectivity were not necessarily compatible; indeed, they may well have been antithetical. The most successful newspapers of the early twentieth century--the Hearst chain, Robert McCormick's *Chicago Tribune*, Joseph Patterson's *New York Daily News*--treated news and opinion as interchangeable parts of the

circulation-and-power-building game, and reflected their owners' often strong political views on every page.

A similar evolution occurred in large-circulation magazines, the other popular medium of the time. Publishers such as S.S. McClure, the father of muckraking, and Henry R. Luce, the leading magazine publisher of the mid-twentieth century, were driven by the same dual desire for circulation and public influence that animated their newspaper publisher peers. The very titles of magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Everybody's*, or Luce's *Time* and *Life*, reflected the urge to transcend the medium's traditional bounds of localism and limited readership. Their turn-of-the-century exposures of political, economic, and social corruption that Theodore Roosevelt scornfully labeled muckraking were in the Hearst-Pulitzer tradition. Like their sensationalist newspaper peers, the muckrakers made no claim to objectivity. But they also placed great store on thorough reportage, prefiguring the investigative journalism of our time.

II

The modern media ideal of comprehensiveness and objectivity is a relatively recent development. It was the product of a more sophisticated readership, seeking to be informed as well as entertained; of publishers who found satisfaction (and profit) in meeting that demand; of journalists who earned status and self-respect as members of a profession with high standards; and of technological and marketing changes that made such journalism economically feasible.

The *New York Times* and the British Broadcasting Corporation--the Grey Lady and Auntie, to use their revealing nicknames--were the most notable exemplars of this High Journalism of the recent past. Both, of course, have been embroiled in recent media scandals. The Gray Lady is down, Auntie is maimed: a coincidence that a Marxist, or a historian, would say is no accident.

Adolph Ochs took over the *Times* in 1896, emblazoned "All the News That's Fit to Print" on its masthead, and committed the paper "to give the news impartially...regardless of party, sect, or interests involved." But Ochs bought the *Times* with the backing of leading New York bankers and financiers, who expected the paper to speak for the conservative Democratic opposition to the takeover of the party by William Jennings Bryan. He made clear his intention "if possible, to intensify [the *Times's*] devotion to the cause of sound money and tariff reform,...and...its advocacy of the lowest tax consistent with good government."

It never was easy to see to it that all the news thought fit to print appeared in the news columns, and that all the views the owner thought fit to print were confined to the editorial page. Arthur Hays Sulzberger, the *Time's* publisher

from 1935 to 1961, who had problems with Zionism (and with his Jewishness), saw to it that Nazi anti-Semitism, the Zionist movement, and ultimately the Holocaust were downplayed. Walter Duranty managed to inject a substantial dose of pro-Stalinism into his reports on the Soviet Union during the 1930s, and Herbert Matthews was gulled into doing a similar whitewash job on Castro in 1957. (The current coverage of Venezuela's Hugo Chavez by the *Times's* Juan Forero pays homage to this tradition.)

Nevertheless under Sulzberger and his son Punch, its publisher from 1961 to 1992, the *Times* won a deserved reputation as America's newspaper of record: comprehensive, well-written, objective and reliable. Other ambitious journals across the country followed suit, erecting Chinese Walls that separated opinion from news. Journalistic accuracy and objectivity came to be firmly embedded values among reporters and publishers alike.

Under its first Director John Reith, during the 1920s and the 1930s, the BBC took on a persona not unlike that of the Sulzbergers' *Times*. Reith fought hard to make the BBC a significant purveyor of news. By mid-century the BBC at home and its World Service abroad were widely regarded as uniquely reliable sources of objective news reporting and analysis. At the same time, Reith committed himself to instructing his audience in the higher things of life. "Few listeners know what they want," he thought, "and very few want what they need." He rose to the challenge with dinner-jacketed radio announcers reading the news in a plummy accent that came to be known as BBC English. These traditions were readily transferred to BBC Television in the 1950s.

III

There is a growing perception that in recent years the elite media have gone off the rails. We have moved in a quarter of a century from Woodward and Bernstein and *All the President's Men* (1976) to Stephen Glass and *Shattered Glass* (2003). Is this a real change, or is there just a commendably greater sensitivity to what in fact is a steady state of media lapses?

It does seem that problems have accelerated since the late 1980s. Janet Cook, a reporter on the *Washington Post*, had to return a Pulitzer won for her affecting (but, as it turned out, invented) story of an eight-year-old heroine addict. Columnists Patricia Smith and Mike Barnicle had to leave the *Boston Globe* after accusations of, respectively, faked stories and plagiarism. Glass of *The New Republic* turned out to be an indefatigable story-inventor, whose menagerie included accounts of a bond trading company with a shrine to Alan Greenspan, and of a First Church of George Herbert Walker Bush Christ, whose members were said to believe that the former President was the reincarnation of Jesus.

Television--more vulnerable to market forces, less weighted down by a tradition of evenhandedness--has been a notably conspicuous contributor to the media malfeasance bubble. The most fecund source of scandal has been that highly profitable creation, the TV news magazine. In 1989 an ABC World News Tonight spy story relied on unannounced reenactments that turned out to be a rich blend of fiction and inaccuracy. CNN in 1998 had to retract as unsupported a charge that the American forces used nerve gas in Laos during the Vietnam War. The most conspicuous misstep--at least until the CBS flogging of fabricated documents regarding Bush's Air National Guard service--was a 1992 Dateline NBC documentary charging that because of the placement of their fuel tanks, GM trucks had a tendency to burst into flame when involved in a crash. Attempts to recreate and film such an event failed. Then rigged tests provided the desired footage. A new level of complexity had been added to Groucho Marx's adage: Who are you going to believe: me or your own eyes?

The impression that something new has happened to the news media gets its greatest support from the scandals that have rocked the New York Times. American Jewish groups sharply criticized the media's coverage of the Palestinian Intifada and the Israeli response, but their most vociferous complaints, and the most fully organized (though short-lived) boycott, were directed at the *Times*. Different in character, but raising again the question of the degree to which the *Times*'s opinion tail wagged its news dog, was the flap in late 2002 over the non-admission of women to the Augusta National Golf Club. The number and placement of articles on the story seemed to many to be out of line with its importance. And the attempt by managing editor Gerald Boyd to exclude two dissenting articles by *Times* sports journalists was a healthy helping of oil to the fire. Alex Jones, co-author of *The Trust*, the definitive history of the Ochs-Sulzberger family, commented: "This is certainly a shift from The *New York Times* as the 'paper of record.'"

The smoke had barely cleared from the Augusta incident when the paper's even-handedness again came into question. Its editorial distaste for the surging Fox News Network slopped over into its news columns. The *Times* reported that Fox chairman Roger Ailes "secretly gave advice to the White House after the Sept. 11 attacks," and equated that revelation with "the moment in 1985 when an ailing Rock Hudson finally explained that he had AIDs." This was a reach. Given the substantial cozyings up to the Kennedy administration by *Washington Post* publisher Phil Graham and *Times* publisher Arthur Hays Sulzberger, an apter comparison might have been with the shock of *Casablanca*'s Captain Renault at learning that there was gambling in Rick's.

The perception that the Grey Lady was taking on water went from the backroom of political partisanship to a prime position in Macy's window with the Jayson Blair and Richard Bragg episodes. Blair manufactured dozens of stories

without stirring from New York. Adding to the egg on the paper's face was the impression that he had gotten away with so much in part because he was African-American, and was cosseted by black managing editor Boyd and guilt-edged white Southerner Howell Raines, the *Times's* editor. Raines himself conceded: "You have a right to ask if I, as a white man, from Alabama,...gave him one chance too many. When I look into my heart for the truth of that, the answer is yes."

The *Times* responded to the revelations with a 14,000-word article detailing Blair's transgressions in stupefying detail: a reach for closure through full disclosure. Publisher Sulzberger hoped that blame would not fall on his paper, his editor, or himself. But he underestimated the degree to which Blair's transgressions violated journalistic ethics. In the end, editor Raines and managing editor Boyd had to go.

The Richard Bragg episode, following close on the heels of the Blair scandal, also involved dissimulation, though of a lesser sort. Bragg, a Pulitzer Prize-winning feature writer, turned in an elegant mood piece on the culture of Apalachicola's oystermen. But it emerged that he only spent a couple of hours in the town, and relied heavily (as he frequently did) on the kindness (and the work) of stringers.

All of this might be dismissed as what the Left likes to call anecdotalism. A more convincing measure that something is awry is the *Times's* corrections of its political news coverage. These are admirable fessings-up to journalistic error. Yet a *Nexis* search of *Times* corrections during the 2000, 2002, and 2004 elections reveals a pattern that uniformly disfavors the Republicans. (See Appendix A.) One thinks of James Hacker in *Yes, Minister* asking his senior civil servant Humphrey Appleby how many women were in high positions in his Ministry of Administrative Affairs. Appleby's considered answer: "Approximately none."

The recent troubles of the BBC, that other model of modern journalistic highmindedness, suggest that the corrosive forces working on the media are not uniquely American. The Beeb's recent trajectory has been very much like that of the *Times*: from the voice of the Establishment, to an overt identification with left-liberal beliefs, and then immersion in the murky waters of questionable journalism. Many think that the BBC dropped its traditional nonpartisanship in its coverage of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the Iraq war. The most conspicuous example of this fall from objectivity grace was BBC journalist Andrew Gilligan's charge that the Blair government "sexed up" a report on Iraqi weapons. A *Times* story on the Beeb's behavior spoke of its "editorial blunders, an inability to negotiate the changing broadcast landscape and an aggressively adversarial approach to the news among some correspondents"--an apt summary of the *Times's* own troubles.

IV

Profound changes in the culture of journalism and journalists and publishing and publishers, and in media technology and the market, provide a historical context for these developments. Over most of its long history, political commitment has been a dependable spur to one-sidedness and distortion. A special mix of journalistic beliefs and publisher self-interest made possible a brief age of objectivity. Now, it appears, conditions have changed, and the media are, so to speak, reverting to type.

Let's start with the journalists: the grunts in the trenches. They once were a motley crew--"drunkards, deadbeats, and bummers," Harvard president Charles Eliot described them in 1890--rebellious in spirit if short on ideology. But college degrees and schools of journalism raised their standards and their status. At the same time the civil rights revolution, Vietnam, and Watergate deepened their already healthy skepticism toward authority. The result was a professional mystique of moral and political commitment highly attractive to bright and ambitious young people. Facts and objectivity remain important, but decreasingly so. Subjectivity is admired, and given academic cachet by postmodernist thought. For journalists of a radical political bent, the long march through the institutions is a worthy goal.

Times reporter Jayson Blair's response when his fabrications were exposed was very much in the spirit of the new journalist culture. Predictably he played the race card, calling the *Times* his "slavemaster," and titling the book he (predictably) wrote "Burning Down My Master's House." Blair presents himself as someone in whom race and postmodern disconnect merge into one persona: "If they're all so brilliant and I'm such an affirmative action hire, how come they didn't catch me?" Richard Bragg also gave voice to the new journalistic sensibility: "I had a much better pair of eyes than I have right now out there. ... We often re-create a scene, or an image, based on someone's memory." *The New Republic's* Stephen Glass was neither remorseful nor defiant, but cool, to the extent of churning out a novel about his hero: himself. (The new style is evident as well in the more *lumpen*, but aspiring, *USA Today*. Its star reporter Jack Kelley, authoritatively accused of numerous plagiarisms and fabrications, denied it all and declared: "I feel like I'm being set up.")

Along with the social and intellectual transformation of journalists came changes in media technology and ownership that encouraged publishers once again to accept, or look favorably upon, reportage with a subjective, partisan edge (and thus to court trouble). The corporate newspaper/TV chains--Gannett, Knight Ridder, Tribune, Time Warner, Media General--are less concerned with the quality or substance of their properties than with the bottom line. As long as editors and reporters keep circulation or viewership up, their political agenda and

modus operandi are of little consequence. A relationship once adversarial--the reactionary publisher *versus* the crusading journalist--has become symbiotic.

Some media magnates--notably Rupert Murdoch and Conrad Black--have a more hands-on involvement in the political tone of their media properties. In this they are in the tradition of Pulitzer, Hearst, Patterson, and McCormick. Other closely held newspapers--notably the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal*--appear to be committed to a Chinese wall between news and opinion. Peter Kann of Dow Jones, which owns the *Journal*, highmindedly ticked off the besetting sins of modern journalism: "the anonymous negative quote, questioning someone's character; ... the closed mind to an inconvenient new fact that doesn't fit a story line; the loaded adjective where no adjective is needed; the analysis that edges across the line to personal opinion."

He might well have had the *New York Times* in mind. Arthur Ochs (Pinch) Sulzberger Jr., who succeeded his father in 1992, was in full accord with the new, participatory, opinionated journalism. He thought of himself as a critic of the establishment (though a *Times* reporter wondered: "How can you be antiestablishment when you're a Sulzberger?"). He picked Howell Raines as editor, according to one observer, because Raines reflected his "confrontational personality and outspoken views."

But the determining factor in the media today, beyond postmodern journalism and with-it publishers, is technological, marketing, and cultural change. FM radio, cable TV, and the capacity to print and distribute national daily newspapers have made possible far more niche marketing than ever before, while maintaining the economies (and the profits) of a mass market. Radio talk shows, cable news stations, magazines and newspapers aimed at particular demographic markets (sports fans, African-Americans, public transportation users in big cities), web sites preaching to the converted, are on the way up. Less precisely targeted outlets--the major TV channel news programs, big-city newspapers, general public magazines--for decades have been on the way down, or, as in the case of *Life* and the *Saturday Evening Post*, out.

For all their managerial and ideological differences, the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* have come up with the same solution to the problem of continuing to make a buck in American journalism: cultivate a niche clientele, but do so nationally and thus maintain necessary economies of scale. The *Times* provides home delivery to well over 200 media markets in 45 states. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, only 13 percent of *Times* display advertising revenue comes from New York City, compared to 66 percent in 1996. The *Times*, it concludes, "defines its customers more by demographic traits--affluent, educated, and 'like-minded' about, for example, cultural and international affairs--than proximity to New York."

The *Wall Street Journal's* readership is no less distinctive: business managers and wannabe executives, conservatives thirsty for an ideological oasis. But like the readers of the *Times*, they have enough similarity of outlook to make it desirable, even necessary, for the paper to devote itself to satisfying them. *USA Today*, the third major national journal (and with the largest circulation), appeals to a more disparate, less well educated audience of commercial travelers, and consequently has a more populist content and a less strongly opinionated editorial policy. A suggestive typology of leading newspapers floats around the web:

The *Wall Street Journal* is read by the people who run the country.

The *New York Times* is read by people who think they run the country.

The *Washington Post* is read by people who think they should run the country.

USA Today is read by people who think they ought to run the country but don't understand the *Washington Post*. They do, however, like their smog statistics in pie charts.

Television news is subject to very similar technological, market, and demographic forces. FM radio and cable television broke the stranglehold of the Big Three networks, which like the national magazines have been steadily losing market share. (Peter Jennings of ABC News has observed: "I don't think we have the vaguest idea on many days who it is we're broadcasting to.")

CNN, the first of the cable news stations, initially appealed to a relatively broad audience. But the rise of Fox News as a Republican-leaning station has led CNN to a more explicit liberal-Democratic bent (something that accords with the leanings of its founder Ted Turner). Stylistically the two channels may be like peas in a pod; but as is the case with the *Times* and the *Journal*, they play to different niche audiences. National Public Radio and the right-wing populist radio talk shows also have this (if little else) in common: distinctly defined ideological and demographic audiences.

For all its disdain for commercial considerations, the BBC's slide into gonzo journalism was also a consequence of the new media environment. The Beeb finds it increasingly difficult to justify its subvention of over \$2.5 billion a year, derived from license fees on every television set in Britain. And its charter is up for renewal in 2006. The problem is that to keep the mass audience that politically ensures its subsidy, it must respond more to popular taste--which further weakens its claim to uniqueness.

Like its American television counterparts (including its closest counterpart, PBS) the BBC faces a strong competitive challenge from successful private

networks, such as Channel 4 and the Rupert Murdoch-owned British Sky Broadcasting Group (BSkyB). BBC responded under Directors John Birt (1993-2000) and especially Greg Dyke (2000-2004) with more popular (and less high-minded) programming, packaged outlets such as BBCAmerica, money-spinning alliances with commercial American channels, and product spinoffs. The Andrew Gilligan episode was a logical result of what the *Guardian's* Martin Kettle has called the BBC's descent into "punk journalism." (Rod Liddle, Gilligan's producer, said of Gilligan: "Andrew gets great stories and some of them are even true.") In May 2004 the BBC appointed a new Director: Mark Thompson, who previously ran Channel Four, a successful commercial television station.

The elite media continues to pay lip service to the ideal of journalistic objectivity and comprehensiveness. The *Times* daily trumpets its commitment to "all the news that's fit to print." But one wonders to what degree this has become a public relations ploy, like Fox News's "fair and balanced" mantra. Reading the *Times* or listening to Fox News nowadays is an experience not unlike following the Hearst press in the 1930s and 1940s: all attitude, all the time.

The take-no-prisoners style of attack commentary now so conspicuous (Paul Krugman and Maureen Dowd in the *Times*, Bill O'Reilly and Sean Hannity on Fox TV; Rush Limbaugh on radio, Al Franken and Anne Coulter in publishing, the ineffable Michael Moore) is often linked to the red/blue cultural division in American politics. It can be ascribed as well to the (related) pull of niche-media marketing. For all their differences of style and content, these shriller voices have the shared role of reaching out to and stirring up their followers by catering to their strongest fears and beliefs.

It is difficult to see how a rebirth of journalistic objectivity and balance could overcome the demands of niche-defined print or TV media journalism. There is nothing sinister (although there is much that is disturbing) about this. It is a rational market response, made profitable by new technology and a changing culture. No one is to blame--except perhaps an audience that prefers its news and opinion, like its coffee and its cars, carefully packaged to its taste.

V

This paper was written before the presidential election, and as befits its historian's perspective has been allowed to stand on its own. But now that the election is--as the young like to say--history, it seems appropriate to consider whether or not that event cast further light--or shadow--on the paper's arguments.

I have two observations to make. One is that to an unparalleled degree the media itself became a topic, and an issue, in the course of the election. Media partisanship expressed in both content and opinion is nothing new, as those with

ancestral memories of the Hearst-Patterson-McCormick era of the 1930s and 1940s are well aware. But generally speaking, the most important factors in modern campaigns have been the candidates and the parties, “interests” (economic, social, cultural), and media activities such as televised presidential debates or premature winner declarations.

This election was different. The *Fahrenheit 9/11* furor in the spring, the recurrent injection of anti-Bush jabs into major television entertainment programs, the full-throated participation of the show biz-celebrity world, the flaps over Dan Rather and the Bush Air National Guard forgeries, ABC political director Mark Halperin’s memo calling on his staff to focus on Bush’s “distortions,” the Sinclair Broadcast Group’s aborted plan to run an anti-Kerry documentary, the aborted last-minute munitions surprise cooked up by CBS and the Times: these added up to a uniquely conspicuous media intervention in a presidential campaign.

Much of this is a logical, predictable extension of the developments discussed in this paper. The role of the media in the election may be taken as another measure of the degree to which the ideal of objective reporting has been eroded by the twin forces of ideology and the market. And it reflects the media’s tropistic impulse to enter into the void of political discourse and identification left by the decline of more traditional forms of political identification, such as party, section, and class.

The second major consideration is whether or not media Bush-bashing (surely the most notable feature of its role in the election) had a substantial effect on the outcome. It is certainly arguable that the election’s intensity owed much to the media blitz. But it is also arguable that the media onslaught was counter-productive; that just as FDR’s 1936 re-election sweep may have been fattened by the fierceness of the anti-New Deal press majority, so there may have been a popular reaction to the pervasiveness of anti-Bushery.

More persuasive, in my view, is another hypothesis: that for all its sound and fury, the media’s impact on the election was far smaller than its fondest advocates hoped for, or its sharpest critics feared. The fact of the matter is that political attitudes (and much else besides) are not airy somethings blown hither and yon by vagrant media breezes. Rather, they are derived from complex social, economic, regional/neighborhood, and familial values and beliefs.

As this paper argues, the media are channeled by ideology, technology and the market to appeal to the values and prejudices of their core audiences; to pander rather than shape; to be, in short, intellectual/political eye candy. I suspect that they are fated as well to be eye candy whose appeal is fading, in the face of (what else?) onrushing technological and cultural change. That rapidly growing phenomenon, blogging; web servers like Netscape with their soupçon of news; the evening local TV news; handout daily papers on bus and subway lines; Comedy Central jokestering and the late night celebrity shows: these were for large

numbers of Americans the major sources of news and perhaps of opinion. Jay Leno *et al* trump Dan Rather *et al*. The mainstream media have more in common with the traditional world of campaign rallies, ads, speeches, debates, etc., in that they have their greatest impact on the already converted, and appear to be of declining importance as political movers and shakers.

That most Americans lack a real zest for politics is evident. (To spend your time campaigning or election-obsessing is for the young and the highly educated.) Other forms of amusement--local sports teams, the latest TV "reality" show--far more significantly attract and hold popular attention. The 3.1 million-person turnout for the Red Sox homecoming was considerably larger than the 2.8 million-person election turnout of Massachusetts voters a few days later. And the former event generated far more widespread, and intense, emotion.

Is this a Good Thing or a Bad Thing? From the perspective of classical republicanism or democratic thought it is Bad: it appears that we may have to square our political life with a public which on the whole is not alert, informed, and engaged. But a less than all-absorbing politics may also signify a degree of social maturity and well-being. Not to live in interesting times; not to believe (as Kwame Nkrumah did) that politics is the gateway to all good things; to believe that it is sometimes better (as Edward Banfield held) not just to do something, but to stand there: these are principles with some redeeming social value. When and if issues of commanding importance rise--9/11 most recently--then Americans, including the American media, seem to rise to the occasion. (The only exception then was the literary-academic elite: a powerful argument against the philosopher-king approach to public affairs.)

It seems likely that the major media will continue to try to make its mark as an autonomous, opinionated player in the political game. It seems just as likely, and in the long run definitively so, that the market, technology, and the infinitely complex and varied means by which a free people make up their political minds, will contain the media's manipulative capacity.

Appendix A--*New York Times* Corrections

A headline yesterday...about Gov. George W. Bush's presidential campaign said in some copies that he had stressed [his] integrity "Even as Drunken-Driving Arrest Raises Questions of Character." That phrasing exceeded the facts of the article, and its opinionated tone was unintended. A replacement headline went astray in the production process. [Nov. 5, 2000]

An article...yesterday reported an assertion that Justice Clarence Thomas...faced a serious conflict of interest because of his wife's work for the Heritage Foundation, which would help staff government jobs if George W. Bush won the presidency....

In its 12th paragraph, the article said that the federal judge who raised the conflict question was an associate of Vice President Al Gore's family, and the 14th paragraph reported that The Times had been directed to that judge by "someone in the Gore campaign." The partisan nature of the source should have been made clear more promptly and reflected in attribution in the headline. ... The article quoted Mrs. Thomas as saying that her transition efforts were nonpartisan... But those comments were omitted in editing and appeared only in the latest New York regional editions. [Dec. 13, 2000]

An article...about the congressional election in New Mexico's Second District referred incompletely to the presence of Hispanic candidates in the campaign for governor... The Democratic candidate for governor, Bill Richardson, is not the only Hispanic in the race; the Republican candidate, John Sanchez, is another. [Oct. 16, 2002]

A map on Wednesday showing results of the elections of governors omitted references where Republicans unseated Democrats. They are Georgia, Maryland, New Hampshire, and South Carolina.

A map on Thursday updating results of the governors' races repeated the omissions of Georgia, Maryland and South Carolina and omitted two states where governorships changed to Republican hands. They are Hawaii and Minnesota. [Nov. 10, 2002]

An article yesterday about a California judge's victory...to be San Diego's district attorney, making her the first openly gay election prosecutor in the

country, misstated her political affiliation. The judge, Bonnie Dumanis, is a Republican. [Nov. 14, 2002]

An article on Thursday about comments on the midterm elections by...Karl Rove...misstated the question to which he responded, "I'm concerned about the 3,000 who died on 9/11." The questioner had asked whether he was concerned about 200,000 people who she said marched in Washington against a war with Iraq--not about concerns that 200,000 innocent Iraqis might die in an American-led invasion. [Nov. 16, 2002]

An article...referred incorrectly to an April exchange between Secretary of State Colin L. Powell and Charlie Rose of PBS. Mr. Powell replied "yes" when Mr. Rose asked if there would be consequences for France's opposition to the war in Iraq. Mr. Rose did not ask whether France would be punished. [June 5, 2003]

Because of an editing error, an article...about an ABC television interview in which President Bush discussed a constitutional amendment on same-sex marriage quoted him incompletely. (The quotation was also incomplete in a front-page article on Sunday.)... What the President said was, "If necessary, I will support a constitutional amendment which would honor marriage between a man and a woman..." The Wednesday article, while omitting the words "if necessary" from the quotation, did specify them in a separate paragraph. [Dec. 24, 2003]

Because of an editing error, a front-page article yesterday about David A. Kay...misstated his view of whether the agency's analysts had been pressured by the Bush administration to tailor their prewar intelligence reports ...to conform to a White House political agenda. Mr. Kay said he believed that there was no such pressure, not that there was. [Jan. 27, 2004]

Because of an editing error, a front-page article yesterday about the final Sunday of campaigning before the presidential election misstated the party affiliation of people who said that President Bush's job approval rating, and the number of Americans who believe the nation was heading in the right direction, were dangerously low for an incumbent. They were Democrats. [Nov. 2, 2004]

An article yesterday describing the results of the most recent New York Times/CBS News poll reversed the results for one question. Fifty percent

of poll respondents said George W. Bush legitimately won the 2000 election, and 45 percent said he did not. [Nov. 2, 2004]