

backdrops for the verbal story; the shots used are often little more than highly condensed symbolizations of the events that they are intended to illustrate. One starving child, one collapsed house, or one applause scene in a campaign rally symbolizes the entire event. Rarely are other vistas included that could lend balance to such symbols, such as showing parts of the community that are unscathed by disaster or varied audience reactions during a rally. The memorable views that are offered may well be the truth, but they usually are only a tiny slice of the evidence that needs airing. To transform televised newscasts into material that provides citizens with richer political insights, all aspects of audiovisual transmission must be improved, including the manner of presentation, the framing that puts content into perspective, and the content, which should be geared to the tasks that citizens actually perform in contemporary democratic societies. Such reforms are essential because televised news now bears the main burden of keeping ordinary Americans abreast of their political world.

Unfortunately, major controversies remain unresolved about the breadth, depth, and even the focus of

knowledge that best equips ordinary Americans for performing the duties of citizenship. The news surfeits with factual accounts, full of details and numbers that not only have little meaning for average people but also often detract from the visual experiences. America's mass media provide an enormous amount of political information, while the audience's capacity and time to process it are limited. Audiovisual messages offer the best hope for mitigating the problem because they expeditiously convey usable information to average people. Additionally, they can simulate real life, allowing viewers to reap some of the learning benefits that ordinarily flow only from direct experiences.

In the past, our society has designated printed messages as the primary medium for conveying sophisticated information. To be literate has meant to be able to learn and communicate via the written word. The notion of building knowledge and achieving wisdom through audiovisual literacy has been an unfamiliar concept. Considering the unique capability of audiovisuals to inform average people, the time is ripe for changing that badly outdated view of human learning.

## Bad News, Bad Governance

By THOMAS E. PATTERSON

**ABSTRACT:** There has been a quiet revolution in news reporting during the past few decades. The traditional descriptive style of reporting has given way to an interpretive style that empowers journalists by giving them more control over content. One consequence is a form of news coverage that focuses on the negative aspects of politics. This development contributes to the public's dissatisfaction with its political leaders and institutions and makes it more difficult for officials to govern effectively. The news media's version of reality is exceedingly narrow and cannot be justified by either the journalists' knowledge of political relationships or their position in the political system. The problem would be lessened by a model of reporting that subordinates the voice of the journalist and aims for a more balanced portrayal of the workings of the political system.

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THE first 100 days of the 104th Congress were historic, but one would never have guessed that from the tone of the news coverage. Although the initiatives in the Republicans' Contract with America moved rapidly through the House of Representatives, statements about the House from network reporters and their sources were 65 percent negative and only 35 percent positive. The Senate coverage was even harsher: 71 percent negative to 29 percent positive. Each of the GOP's top congressional leaders, Newt Gingrich, Robert Dole, and Richard Armitage, was portrayed negatively, and their combined coverage was more than 60 percent unfavorable. Nor was the blistering attack on Congress and its leaders confined to network television. According to the Center for Media and Public Affairs, coverage of the early weeks of the 104th Congress in major newspapers was nearly as negative.<sup>1</sup>

Why did the press treat the Republican Congress so harshly? Some would attribute it to the alleged liberal bias of the news media. According to this theory, the national press "tends to be strongly biased in favor of the Democratic-liberal-left axis of the Republican-conservative-right axis of opinion."<sup>2</sup>

The problem with this thesis is that it often does not fit the facts: during the first 100 days of the 104th Congress, congressional Democrats

actually received worse coverage than congressional Republicans: 82 percent negative coverage versus 68 percent negative. Democrats received substantially less attention from the press than the Republicans did but were more soundly criticized when their activities were reported.<sup>3</sup>

The inadequacy of the liberal-bias theory of national news coverage is also apparent in the media's treatment of Bill Clinton's presidency. Although Clinton is the first Democratic president in 12 years, he did not even get the honeymoon period that newly elected presidents might expect from the press. Clinton's coverage was only 43 percent positive during his first two months on the job. Six months into his presidency, Clinton's numbers were worse—only 34 percent of news evaluations were positive, while 66 percent were negative. His press coverage improved somewhat in the closing months of 1993 when his successful campaign on behalf of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was a leading news story, but, overall, his first presidential year was characterized by negative coverage.<sup>4</sup>

In the media's view, Clinton did almost everything wrong during his inaugural year. In the spring, for example, a series of failed nominations, including those of Lani Guinier and Zoe Baird, and personal controversies, such as the president's \$200 haircut, led reporters to speak of "amateur hour" at the White House. Said ABC's John McWethy, "The

1. "No Newt Is Good Newt," *Media Monitor* (Center for Media and Public Affairs), pp. 2-5 (Mar.-Apr. 1995).

2. Edith Efron, *The News Twisters* (Los Angeles: Nash, 1971), p. 47.

3. "No Newt Is Good Newt," p. 2.

4. "They're No Friends of Bill," *Media Monitor* (Center for Media and Public Affairs), pp. 2-5 (Jul.-Aug. 1994).

Clinton administration has repeatedly bungled high-profile nominations with the president looking indecisive, his staff incompetent." *Newsweek's* Joe Klein told CBS's Dan Rather, "He got away from the values that made him seem like one of us—a guy who'd ride the bus. Now he's a guy who takes the plane and gets his hair cut for \$200."<sup>5</sup>

#### ANTIPOLITICS: THE REAL BIAS OF THE NEWS MEDIA

The liberal-bias theory fails because it ignores the checks and balances within the news system. Although journalists are disproportionately liberal and Democratic in their personal beliefs,<sup>6</sup> the norms of their profession include a commitment to the balanced treatment of the two political parties, a code that is enforced by the layer of editors who oversee the work of reporters.

The norms of objectivity do not, however, include a restraint on skepticism. Reporters have a jaded opinion of politicians, whether liberal or conservative, and of the political process within which they operate. More than anything else, it is this derisive attitude that accounts for the news media's rough treatment of Clinton and the Republican Congress.

The absence of effective restraints on this attitude is reflected in the fact

5. "The Honeymoon That Wasn't," *Media Monitor* (Center for Media and Public Affairs), pp. 2-3 (Sept.-Oct. 1993).

6. David H. Weaver and G. Cleveland Whitely, *The American Journalist*, 2d ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 29; S. Robert Lichter and Stanley Rothman, "Media and Business Elites," *Public Opinion*, p. 42 (Oct.-Nov. 1981).

that political leaders and institutions are likely to be criticized almost regardless of what they do. The Democratic-controlled 103d Congress (1993-94) was derided by the press as a do-nothing legislature that would not tackle the budget deficit, welfare, and political reform issues. The *New York Times* labeled the 103d Congress as the least productive and most factitious in memory.<sup>7</sup> An analysis by the Center for Media and Public Affairs found that television coverage of the 103d Congress was 64 percent negative.<sup>8</sup>

When the Republican-controlled Congress took on each of these issues, the news media changed their tune but not their tone. Now Congress was faulted for being too aggressive and, as we have seen, the balance of this coverage was also negative.

President Clinton's first year in office also provides an instructive study in the press's tendency to criticize irrespective of the situation. No news theme was more persistent than the notion that Clinton was renegotiating on his policy commitments. This theme surfaced in the first weeks of his presidency, when Clinton broke a campaign promise to open the nation's shores to the Haitian boat people and sought a compromise with Congress for a new policy on gays in the military. Commitments over tax increases and spending cuts in pursuit of a deficit-reduction policy kept the theme alive into the summer. In the fall, the theme appeared during the kickoff of the health care debate, when Clinton

7. "Congress's Sour Finish," *New York Times*, 8 Oct. 1994.

8. "No Newt Is Good Newt," p. 2.

expressed a willingness to include the plans of others as long as they accepted his basic positions on universal coverage and cost containment. The Center for Media and Public Affairs' analysis indicates that more than 60 percent of news references to Clinton's handling of domestic policy issues were negative in tone. These criticisms were voiced through the statements of reporters, Clinton's partisan opponents, and ordinary people. On the *NBC Evening News* of 19 July, for example, a gay ex-Marine criticized the "don't ask, don't tell" compromise policy: "I think it's a cop-out from what he planned to do. It's just a cheap imitation."<sup>9</sup>

Some of this criticism was right on target, but much of it was undeserved. The fact is that Clinton kept far more campaign promises than he broke. Among the promises kept were a tax increase on higher incomes, an end to the ban on abortion counseling in family-planning clinics, a family-leave program, banking reform, NAFTA, a college-loan program, the Brady bill, and a youth training program. Clinton also proposed numerous programs that were still working their way through Congress as 1993 ended.

Clinton's relationship with Congress was extraordinary. Since 1953, *Congressional Quarterly* has kept track of congressional backing for legislation on which the president has announced a position. Congress backed Clinton's position on 88 percent of contested votes in 1993, a level exceeded only twice in 40 years—by Dwight Eisenhower in 1953 and Lyn-

9. "The Honeymoon That Wasn't," p. 4.

was eventually quieted by the excesses of its practitioners and by the emerging rules of objective journalism, which held that reporters should refrain from expressing their opinions in news stories.

Straightforward reporting became the dominant style. The journalist's guidelines were the five Ws: who said what to whom, when, and why. The focus was the facts of an event rather than the underlying political situation. Since the facts were often based on what politicians had said or done, they greatly influenced the tone of the coverage. A standard formula for a news story was a descriptive account of what politicians said and to whom they said it. News accounts did not ordinarily delve into why they said it, for that would venture into the realm of subjectivity. At the very least, journalists took pains to separate the facts of an event from their interpretations of it.

Today, facts and interpretation are freely intermixed in news reporting. Interpretation provides the theme, and the facts illuminate it. The theme is primary, the facts are illustrative. As a result, events are compressed and joined together within a common theme. Reporters question politicians' actions and commonly attribute strategic intentions to them, giving politicians less of a chance to speak for themselves.<sup>13</sup>

Interpretive reporting is nearly as old as journalism itself but has only recently become the dominant model of news coverage. When the televi-

sion networks in the 1960s changed from a 15-minute format to a 30-minute format and began to generate most of their own news, they increasingly relied upon an interpretive style of reporting.<sup>14</sup> The inverted-pyramid form of the traditional newspaper story is less well suited to television. This form trails off as it proceeds from the most salient fact of an event to the least important, allowing the newspaper editor to cut the story almost anywhere in order to fit it into the available space. The reader's eye anticipates the concluding line. On television, however, this form gives the appearance of a news story that has been abruptly terminated, ending with a whimper rather than a bang. Accordingly, network executives devised a punchier, more thematic style of reporting built around story lines rather than facts. NBC's Reuven Frank instructed his correspondents: "Every news story should, without any sacrifice of probability or responsibility, display the attributes of fiction, of drama. It should have structure and conflict, problem and denouement, rising action and falling action, a beginning, a middle and an end."<sup>15</sup>

Newspapers pursued the interpretive style less as an attempt to imitate television than as an effort to establish a separate niche in the news market. Unable to compete with television as a source of fast-breaking news, the newspapers migrated toward reports designed to ex-

14. Paul Weaver, "Is Television News Biased?" *Public Interest*, 27:69 (1972).

15. Quoted in Michael Robinson and Margaret Sheehan, *Over the Wire and on TV* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1983), p. 226.

13. Kristi Andersen and Stuart J. Thorson, "Public Discourse or Strategic Game? Changes in Our Conception of Elections," *Studies in American Political Development*, 3:273 (1989).

10. *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, 31 Dec. 1994, p. 3620.

11. Thomas E. Patterson, *Out of Order* (New York: Vintage, 1994), p. 245.

12. Austin Ranney, *Channels of Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), pp. 52-55.

plain or embellish the previous day's events. The extent to which this interpretive form of reporting has taken over newspaper coverage is evident in the *New York Times*. Between 1960 and 1992, the proportion of interpretive reports on its front page increased tenfold, from 8 percent to 80 percent.<sup>16</sup>

The interpretive style empowers journalists by giving them more control over the news message. Whereas descriptive reporting is driven by the facts, the interpretive form is driven by the theme around which the story is built. As Paul Weaver notes, facts become "the materials with which the chosen theme is illustrated."<sup>17</sup> The descriptive style casts the journalist in the role of a reporter. The interpretive style requires the journalist to act also as an analyst. The journalist is thus positioned to give shape to the news in a way that the descriptive style does not allow.

The interpretive style elevates the journalist's voice above that of the news maker. As the narrator, the journalist is always at the center of the story, so much so that during network coverage of the 1992 general election, for example, journalists spoke six minutes for every minute that the candidates were shown speaking. A viewer who watched the network news every night of the general election would have heard less from the mouths of Clinton, Bush, and Ross Perot than from viewing a single presidential debate.<sup>18</sup> During

16. Patterson, *Out of Order*, p. 82.

17. Weaver, "Is Television News Biased?" pp. 67-69.

18. "Clinton's the One," *Media Monitor* (Center for Media and Public Affairs), p. 2 (Nov. 1992).

war to the people, before the Congress and the courts, and forced the withdrawal of American power from Vietnam."<sup>21</sup>

Many in the press went a step further and concluded that all politicians were suspect. Two presidents had lied, therefore no politician could be taken at his word.<sup>22</sup> It was a comfortable assumption for a press with a watchdog philosophy. "Our habits of mind," the *Washington Post's* Paul Taylor observes, "are shaped by what Lionel Trilling once described as the 'adversary culture.' . . . We are progressive reformers, deeply skeptical of all the major institutions of society except our own."<sup>23</sup>

Even as late as the early 1970s, however, the old rules of journalism maintained a powerful hold on reporters. The press attacked Johnson and Nixon, but only when the charges could be substantiated. Thus the Watergate story developed slowly, gathering strength only as incriminating facts and credible allegations came increasingly to light.

The press was unable to sustain this exacting type of scrutiny, however. Investigative journalism requires an amount of time and knowledge that journalists do not routinely possess. It ordinarily takes a great deal of effort to determine the validity of a politician's claim or to uncover the full range of motives behind it.

21. James Reston, "End of the Tunnel," *New York Times*, 30 Apr. 1975.

22. See, for example, Kampelman, "Power of the Press," pp. 7-41; Irving Kristol, "Crisis over Journalism," in *Press, Politics, and Popular Government*, ed. George Will (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 1972), p. 50.

23. Paul Taylor, *See How They Run* (New York: Knopf, 1990), p. 23.

The pressures of the 24-hour news cycle make it nearly impossible for journalists to engage in this type of reporting on a regular basis.

By the mid-1970s, the media had settled upon a substitute for true investigative journalism. They began to use opponents as a means to undermine a politician's claims. When a politician made a statement, they turned to his adversaries to attack it. Conflict, always an element of political coverage, became the predominant theme.<sup>24</sup>

By the 1980s, attack journalism had come to include reporters as direct participants; they regularly worked their own criticisms into their interpretive reports. These attacks are circumscribed in that journalists seldom contest the values inherent in political conflict, but they constantly question politicians' motives, methods, and effectiveness. This type of reporting looks like watchdog journalism but is not. It is ideological in its premise: politicians are assumed to act out of self-interest rather than also from political conviction. Journalists routinely claim that politicians make promises they do not intend to keep or could not keep even if they tried. Most bad-press stories criticize politicians for shifting their positions, waffling on tough issues, posturing, or pandering to whichever group they happen to be facing.<sup>25</sup>

The evidence, however, shows otherwise. Four major scholarly studies

24. See Larry Sabato, *Feeding Frenzy: How Attack Journalism Has Changed American Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1991).

25. Michael Robinson, "Improving Election Information in the Media" (Paper delivered at Voting for Democracy Forum, Washington, DC, Sept. 1983), p. 2.

have systematically compared what presidential candidates said on the campaign trail and what they did in office when elected. Each of these studies reached the same conclusion: presidents fulfill the promises they made as candidates. For example, political scientist Gerald Pomper's exhaustive study of party platforms in nine presidential elections found that the victorious candidates, once in office, tried to fulfill nearly all of their policy commitments and succeeded in achieving most of them. When candidates fail to deliver on a promise, it is usually because Congress refuses to act or because conditions have changed dramatically.<sup>26</sup>

Why would it be otherwise? Presidents seek to govern, and to do so they need the support of the interests they appealed to during the campaign. A basic truth about politics is that politicians have a powerful reason to honor their commitments. There is no constituency that is loyal despite broken promises. George Bush paid dearly even within his own party for reneging on his 1988 pledge of "no new taxes."

Furthermore, contrary to what the press may imply, the play of politics is not in itself dishonorable. Press accounts of the Clinton presidency and the Contract with America made

26. Gerald Pomper with Susan Lederman, *Elections in America* (New York: Doubt, Mead, 1976), chap. 8. See also Michael G. Krukones, *Promises and Performance: Presidential Campaigns as Policy Predictors* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984); Jan Budge and Richard I. Hofferbert, "Mandates and Policy Outputs: U.S. Party Platforms and Federal Expenditures," *American Political Science Review*, 84:111-32 (1990); Jeff Fishel, *Presidents and Promises* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1985), pp. 38, 42-43.

crease in interpretive journalism and in press cynicism has meant that those who run for the presidency can expect rough treatment by the press.

This type of coverage has a decisive impact on voters' perceptions of the candidates. By the time the 1992 race had narrowed to Clinton, Bush, and Perot, polls indicated that most voters were unhappy with the candidates; all three had high negative ratings, and more than half of those surveyed said they wished they had other candidates from which to select. In 1988, voters went to the polls to choose what they saw as the lesser of two evils. George Bush and Michael Dukakis were both viewed more negatively than positively by the electorate as a whole. On election day, more than three in five voters said they would have preferred someone else. The 1988 situation resembled that of 1980, when the choice was between Ronald Reagan, Jimmy Carter, and John Anderson. Half of the electorate interviewed in a poll said they were dissatisfied with the major-party nominees. Though Reagan won, opinion surveys indicated he was the least popular presidential winner since polling had begun in the 1930s.<sup>29</sup>

The electorate's disenchantment is without precedent. The Gallup organization first asked voters their opinions of the presidential candidates in 1936. Through the 1960s, Barry Goldwater in 1964 was the only candidate with an overall negative rating with the voters. Since then, most candidates have had a negative rating. This trend coincides

29. *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

exactly with the trend in the press's portrayal of the candidates.<sup>30</sup>

The same pattern holds true for Congress and the presidency. Since the late 1980s, news coverage of these institutions has been highly negative in tone. It is hardly surprising that the public's perception of Congress and the president during this period has been largely unfavorable. The press's bad-news tendency is not the only reason why voters' impressions of politics and politicians have been so negative in recent elections, but it is a major factor.

If Vietnam and Watergate marked a time when the press turned against the politicians, the recent period represents a time when the press has turned on them. Day after day the news media tell their audiences that politicians are not worthy of the people they represent. "I know a lot of people who are thinking about this [presidential] election the same way they think about the Iran-Iraq war," Meg Greenfield wrote in 1980. "They desperately want it to be over, but they don't want anyone to win."<sup>31</sup> George Will said much the same thing in 1992: "The congestion of debates may keep these guys off the streets for a few days. When they emerge from the debates, November—suddenly the loveliest word in the language—will be just around the corner."<sup>32</sup>

The public has few psychological defenses against the news media's claim that political leaders are self-

30. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

31. Meg Greenfield, "The Anxiety of Choosing Sides," *Newsweek*, 20 Oct. 1980, p. 108.

32. George Will, "Debates Keep Them off the Streets," *Syracuse Post-Standard*, 15 Oct. 1992.

interested and inept. Unlike messages that attempt to change issue attitudes (such as editorials that take a position on abortion policy), the claim that an officeholder has a devious motive or lacks ability does not contradict any deeply held belief. Moreover, the message appears to be factual rather than what it really is, mere opinion. Like the proverbial Monday morning quarterback, journalists claim to have all the answers and talk as if the best course of action was evident from the start—that is, to all except those in charge of running the show. This pretense is remarkable in view of the fact that journalists see the world in all of its bewildering complexity through the narrow lens of events of the past 24 hours.

Of course, politics is sometimes plagued by officeholders' deceit and myopia, and the media should inform the public about that. But the press has gone way beyond that point, and the effect is to rob political leaders of the public confidence that is required to govern effectively. Leaders must have substantial latitude if they are to pursue policies that will serve the public interest in the long run. The discontinuous, fluid, and transient form of politics that the press generates works against such leadership. It is a politics of shifting standards and fleeting controversies, spurring citizens to demand immediate solutions to stubborn problems, which in turn encourages politicians to pursue short-term and ultimately self-limiting policies and strategies.

The presidency is particularly affected by a hypercritical press. Much of the president's authority derives not from constitutional grants of

power but from the public force that is inherent in the president's position as the only official chosen by the whole nation. When the president's public approval ratings are high, Congress is more responsive to presidential leadership. When approval ratings are low or in decline, which has now become the norm, congressional resistance intensifies.

Government itself has also been weakened by the media's antipolitics message. It is ironic that journalists, who tend to have liberal beliefs, have become the unwitting handmaiden of the conservatives. Right-wing attacks on government activism gain power when the public believes that government is ineffective and run by inept and self-serving officials. Opinion polls during the 1994 campaign indicated a majority of Americans believed, contrary to fact, that under Clinton the economy had receded, the budget deficit had increased, and tax rates on lower-income Americans had been raised. The Republicans' sweeping victory in the 1994 congressional elections was built on a public so persuaded of official incompetence that it assumed the worst about government's performance.

#### BACK TO BASICS: IMPROVING THE NEWS

The news media have little justification for their arrogant portrayal of politics. They ought to be more humble, for they fail to meet fully the two standards that apply to those who exercise power in a democratic system: accountability and representation.

In the case of elected officials, accountability is gained through party competition and the ballot.

Every politician has felt the sting of partisan rebuke, and thousands of them have lost their jobs through defeat at the polls. The public has no comparable hold over journalists, and there is very little accountability within the press itself. The unwritten rule is that journalists do not attack other journalists. Rarely does a major news organization sharply criticize the reporting practices of a competitor.

The U.S. news media have resisted formal efforts at self-regulation. In 1973, with the sponsorship of major foundations, a National News Council was established for the purpose of handling complaints about the news practices of the major U.S. newspapers and broadcast networks. Similar councils have been important in some European countries in correcting press abuses, but the U.S. council was disbanded after a decade of ineffectiveness. Several leading news organizations, including the *New York Times*, refused to participate in the council's proceedings or heed its findings.

Accountability is also not obtained through journalists' claim to professional standards. In fact, journalism is not a full-fledged profession. Unlike medicine, law, and other such professions, there is no body of knowledge in journalism against which a practitioner's actions can be measured. Medical malpractice is defined by careless or willful departures from scientifically or clinically verified practices. "Journalistic malpractice" is nearly an oxymoron. There are many good journalists who prize accuracy and thoroughness in their reporting, but even they embrace assumption about political behavior that are hair-truths at best.

Walter Lippmann was right in arguing that news and truth coincide only at a few points and that all else in the news is opinion.<sup>33</sup> Consider journalists' claim to know the motives, supposedly self-serving, behind the actions of political leaders. The attribution of motives is risky business under the best of circumstances. The person engaged in a behavior often cannot untangle the complex web of motives behind it. How then can the journalist, viewing politicians from the outside, know that their promises are calculated deceptions?

Interpretive journalism thus asks too much of the men and women of the press. They are required to have an understanding of political developments that they could not conceivably possess. The public interest would be better served if journalists recognized the limitations of their craft. This would not necessarily require a return to 1960s-style descriptive reporting but would entail a far greater degree of restraint than the media now exercise.

The power of the media needs to be contained not only due to a lack of accountability but also because the press excludes itself from the politics of representation. Politics is essentially a process for the mobilization of bias—that is, it involves the representation of particular values and interests. Candidates, officeholders, parties, and groups are in the business of representation. But what interests do journalists represent? CBS News executive Richard Salant once said that his reporters covered sto-

33. Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (1922; reprint ed., New York: Free Press, 1965), p. 229.

ries "from nobody's point of view."<sup>34</sup> What he was saying in effect was that journalists do not consistently represent the political concerns of any group in particular.

The news, at best, is a workable compromise between the economic need of news organizations to attract and hold their audiences and the polity's need for a public forum. Interpretive journalism rests on the fiction that journalists can adequately supply the second of these needs. Except when fulfilling a genuine watchdog role, journalists are not an appropriate vehicle for the articulation of the values at stake in political conflict. Their interest is the riveting news report. National issues are nearly at-

ways secondary to a good story, which is why Newt Gingrich's personal foibles received as much coverage as his policy positions during the first hundred days of the 104th Congress.<sup>35</sup>

If the news is to better serve a representational function, the political leaders who are the carriers of policy messages must be given more opportunities to make their claims. There is no justification for election coverage that allots six minutes to the journalist for every minute that a candidate speaks. The trend toward interpretive reporting has diminished the voices of those who are involved in the representation of values. Theirs must be the larger voice if the news is to provide the type of marketplace of ideas that serves democracy's needs.

34. Quoted in Edward Jay Epstein, *News from Nowhere* (New York: Random House, 1973), p. ix.

35. "No Newt Is Good Newt," p. 2.

## Easy Citizenship: Television's Curious Legacy

By RODERICK P. HART

**ABSTRACT:** This article argues that television has reduced the burdens of citizenship for the average American and that that reduction is dangerous. Television does all of this by overwhelming viewers with the sights and sounds of governmental life and by supersaturating them with political information. All too often, however, this tumult creates in viewers a sense of activity rather than genuine civic involvement. In addition, television constantly tells the story of specific persons in specific situations, thereby producing a kind of highly individuated, cameo politics that distracts viewers from common problems and public possibilities. Television does this work, and much more, in a highly entertaining fashion and is often genuinely informative. But television also produces an overwhelming passivity in viewers even while making them feel politically involved. The article argues that the American polity needs real, not hypothetical, involvement if it is to meet its civic obligations.

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