

Civic Engagement in the Era of Big Stories

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The close of the 20th century and the opening of the 21st have seen the advent of a new kind of event-centered news story. New media have exploded, economic concentration in the media industry has intensified, the norms of mainstream journalism have shifted, and tabloid media increasingly influence the agenda and the content of the mainstream media. Simultaneously, new technologies like the Internet and greater cable television bandwidth now allow news consumers to witness events such as natural disasters or even mass murders in real time. We live today in the era of big stories, in which the media's long-standing interest in turning dramatic news events into news serials (Cook 1996) has blossomed (or mutated, depending on one's perspective) into a virtual "news saga" industry. Breaking news events that promise dramatic story developments are quickly translated into stories-of-the day, week, or month, often complete with their own logo and theme music. Media coverage of dramatic news events is high in volume and sustained in duration, and the public is exposed to big stories through both news and entertainment channels in both traditional and virtual formats.

How do the media matter to democratic society in this new era? And what are the prospects for civic engagement in this media environment? Expanding on observations and data from one news saga, the Lewinsky/impeachment scandal, we suggest that the

new media environment requires a re-thinking of what "civic engagement" in the 21st century entails. Specifically, we argue here that scholars' conceptualizations of "the public" need to become more nuanced in order to recognize forms of civic engagement that our existing conceptual lenses may overlook. We also argue that a form of quasi-deliberation presently overlooked may occur within a highly sensationalized mass media environment—indeed, that sensational news sagas may even provide conditions for enhancing certain forms of public engagement.

Competing Visions of the Public: Deliberators, Cognitive Misers, or Spectators?

The public has typically been conceptualized in political communication research in one of three ways: as active deliberators engaging in serious, cognitive, rational discourse about substantial matters of public policy, as passive spectators responding acquiescently to meaningless "media spectacles," or as cognitive misers responding heuristically to elite and media "cues." "Media spectacle" and "public deliberation" have evolved in scholarly discourse as ideal types that are usually implicitly or explicitly contrasted (Peters 1995). Moreover, a standard assumption among many public opinion scholars has been that the public can display only limited rationality at best, given the poor state of the media environment (see for example Fishkin 1995). This assessment has led some scholars of public opinion to try develop avenues of public deliberation and expression that side step the media arena altogether. Meanwhile, a prolific field of public opinion research has developed heuristic models that highlight the information shortcuts individuals may rely on in forming their policy preferences, their evaluations of politicians, and their voting decisions. In these models, the media matter only to the degree that they provide recognizable cues that trigger heuristic opinion formation (see for example Zaller 1998), and the possibilities for meaningful civic engagement seem limited.

Useful as these concepts can be, the gray area in between these three conceptual poles remains underlit. This can keep us from recognizing some forms of public engagement with the news that exist somewhere between rationalistic deliberation, mindless acquiescence, and heuristic shortcutting. The meaningful symbolic and affective dimensions of public engagement with the news—for example, the symbolic dimensions of group identification with news narratives—can be overlooked. Indeed, the same conditions that create news that is "all Monica all the time" may also create at least some conditions for certain forms of civic engagement, as publics interact with media spectacles that engage them symbolically and affectively as well as rationalistically or heuristically.

We suggest that under certain conditions, something approaching public deliberation can occur even within a highly sensationalized mass-mediated public sphere, though that quasi-deliberation is marked by symbolic, affective and even entertainment dimensions that deliberative purists may not appreciate. When news sagas rivet public attention over

a significant period of time, when they raise the kinds of personal moral and values questions (rather than more technical questions of public policy alternatives, for example) with which publics can engage both cognitively and affectively, and when they give rise to significant coverage in a variety of media as well as to significant polling and other measures of public opinion, the conditions are created for a kind of quasi-deliberation. We suggest, therefore, that one way that civic engagement manifests itself in the emerging era is in the process by which various publics develop their particular understandings of the political world by interacting with big story narratives.

Quasi-Deliberation within a Sensationalized Public Sphere?

The growth of a news saga industry is typically dismissed as the triumph of the profit motive and sensationalism over traditional news values. Coverage of the Lewinsky story has seemed to many observers the clearest illustration possible of the erosion of professionalism and good news judgment in a media industry increasingly driven by entertainment values. As Williams and Delli Carpini (1999, 20) have observed, "with Monica all notions that one could make clear cut distinctions between serious and less serious news outlets, even between news and non-news genres had been effectively destroyed."

Yet Williams and Delli Carpini also argue cogently that this changed media environment "created new opportunities and pitfalls for the public to enter and interpret the political world" (ibid. 7). Extending the logic of this argument, the entertainment value of the Lewinsky scandal did not automatically rule out the possibility that serious issues were also at stake for engaged publics. To the contrary, it can be argued that personal issues of morality, lying, and judgments about the seriousness of Clinton's offense can all be productively explored through engagement with comedy and dramatized narratives as well as traditional news. In fact, it is possible that news sagas like the Lewinsky scandal actually create conditions for *increased* public engagement with social and political issues. For example, the dramatic elements of the news narrative, the nature of the issues at stake, the sheer volume of media coverage and opinion polling, and the length of time during which the Lewinsky story dominated the news created some conditions for various publics to do more than passively watch the spectacle and respond to elite and media cues.

The Public and the Lewinsky Scandal: Was It Just the Economy, Stupid?

The two tendencies discussed above—the tendency of political communication scholars to miss the "gray areas" of quasi-deliberation, and the tendency of scholars and pundits to dismiss media coverage of big stories as lacking political significance—combined to produce a reigning common sense about public opinion during the Lewinsky/impeachment scandal. Clinton's strong public approval ratings throughout the scandal were not well predicted by dominant models of mass-mediated political communication, but many political scientists have drawn two conclusions: That the media coverage of the scandal did not matter to public opinion nearly as much as nonmedia influences, and that the public responded to the scandal in relatively thoughtless ways, relying on simple heuristics like the state of the economy to decide whether the president should be impeached (Zaller 1998; Jacobsen 1999). These scholarly arguments resonate with a common argument found in popular discourse that the economy was a major factor, if not *the* major factor, bolstering Clinton's approval ratings and depressing public support for impeachment.

The reigning common sense about public reactions to the Lewinsky scandal reflects the conceptual trichotomy described above. For many observers, the public is a heuristic animal, and the heuristics that mattered during the Lewinsky scandal were non-media variables like the state of the economy. Some others, as Broder and Morin (1998) observed, "see the [public's] acceptance of Clinton's actions as proof that Americans are utterly cynical about their political leaders, mute spectators at a television drama they despise but cannot escape." Few if any scholarly observers have viewed the scandal as giving rise to serious, rational public deliberation.

This common sense overlooks important elements of both the public's reaction and how the media mattered during this, the mother of all news sagas. What needs to be better recognized, we believe, are aspects so far overlooked: public engagement with dramatic news *narratives*, certain publics' *symbolic identification* with key characters in the story, public engagement with debates over *values*, and public engagement that is as much *emotional* as cognitive.

The narrative aspect of the Lewinsky scandal is crucial to understanding how the public made sense of the scandal and to understanding how the media mattered, precisely because the media do not simply provide the public with disembodied information, but arrange that information into *stories* (Bennett 1996; Darnton 1975). These stories embody commonly-accepted narratives of how events happen, why they occur, and what they mean, as well as socially-constructed symbols representing who is involved and what is at stake. As individuals engage with these narratives, they may accept, reject, or construct different versions of the news narrative (Dahlgren 1988; Gamson 1992). Nevertheless, it seems plausible that the public responds to news *narratives*, not just to free-floating "cues."

A crucial aspect of the Lewinsky narrative, for example, was the same basic ingredient of any compelling story: the motives of the key characters. The public did not simply weigh the merits of the evidence against Clinton in a rationalistic way, but also assessed the motivations driving key characters such as Linda Tripp, Kenneth Starr, and the

Republican leadership. Nor did public constructions of the Lewinsky narrative arise independently of the media environment.

The public opinion record is clear that the majority public perceived Starr's and the Republicans' motivations in impeaching Clinton as partisan (Lawrence, Bennett, and Hunt 1999; Sonner and Wilcox 1999). More recent research indicates that news which framed the Lewinsky scandal as a partisan attack on Clinton—a significant proportion of all Lewinsky news—had powerful effects on public approval for Clinton, apparently activating a kind of backlash effect (Shah et al 2000). Moreover, other research has discovered that the strongest predictor of Clinton's approval ratings was peoples' assessments of the economy, but the strongest predictor of peoples' *opposition to impeachment* were their attitudes toward Kenneth Starr (Silva, Jenkins-Smith, and Waterman 1999). This finding suggests that there were two sets of considerations (the economy vs. Ken Starr) shaping opinion on two distinct questions (approval of Clinton's job performance vs. supporting his impeachment). It further suggests the possibility that "Ken Starr" became a symbolic proxy for a constellation of doubts the public had about the fairness and propriety of the impeachment proceedings. Most importantly, all of these findings suggest that the public attended not only to the facts of the case against Clinton, but organized those facts by reference to a narrative in which the motivations of key characters were a prime consideration.

As the Ken Starr example suggests, symbolic constructions of the key characters in big story narratives are also an important component of public engagement. Another example may be found in the fact that African-Americans were consistently more supportive of Clinton throughout the scandal than were whites. Though black support for Clinton was doubtlessly intertwined with traditionally strong Democratic partisanship among blacks, the evidence suggests that black support for Clinton extended beyond simple party identification or policy-based heuristics. For example, a late August 1998 Pew Center poll that measured a whopping 94 percent approval rating for Clinton among African-Americans also found no differences between blacks and whites regarding satisfaction with the way things were going in the country, and found that almost no African-Americans offered the economy as the reason they supported Clinton's performance in office. In fact, in a fascinating twist, blacks were more likely than whites to approve of Clinton *personally* throughout the scandal, much more likely to see the proceedings against him as unfair, and significantly more likely than whites to blame Clinton's political enemies for the scandal.

Different symbolic identifications are also evident in reactions of lower and higher income groups to the scandal—reactions that indicate that public opinions were not simply driven by heuristic assessments of economic prosperity. Higher income groups were much less likely than lower-income groups to report liking Bill Clinton personally *and* liking his policies. Similar differences were recorded among whites and blacks: 28 percent of whites said they liked both Bill Clinton and his policies, versus 77 percent of blacks. These findings suggest that approval of Clinton was strongly associated with different groups' constructions of and identification with Clinton-as-a-person.

Another important dimension of public engagement with the Lewinsky scandal, we believe, was the way the scandal raised personal and moral issues that many citizens could easily grasp and respond to. It is plausible that what many people found interesting, even riveting, about the Lewinsky story was not simply the sex, but the values questions that the scandal raised, questions that were not so much technical or legal (despite the legalistic turn taken by much of the impeachment proceedings) as they were moral and normative: Should the president have sexual relations with a younger employee, even if fully consensual? Does a president's sexual behavior tell us how he will govern? Should the president be forced to publicly disclose his marital infidelity? Does having sex in the Oval Office, and then encouraging others to conceal it from the legal system, constitute a dereliction of presidential duties? These kinds of questions are arguably less prone to mechanistic elite and media cueing than the technical, legal, or public policy questions that surround so many opinion situations precisely because they are questions for which publics can more readily develop independent standards of judgment, which more readily engage the "emotive, valuing, ethical side" of public opinion (Yankelovich 1991, 59), and which are thus good candidates for something more than heuristically-driven mass opinion. Moreover, these emotionally-charged questions that touch on personal concerns engage people affectively as well as cognitively. It is plausible that in addition to stimulating more interest in the news, such stories may also increase the kinds of "political conversation" that deliberative theorists see at the heart of democracy (Kim, Wyatt, and Katz 1999).

We therefore encourage a re-examination of scholars' conceptualizations of "civic engagement," and our assumptions about how the media matter, in the new era of big stories.

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