



MEDIA, POLITICS, AND DEMOCRACY

Understanding the expanding array of media that will define civic engagement in the 21st century.

Americans have grown increasingly cynical about politics, politicians, and the media. Yet media, civic engagement, and governing are intertwined, for better and worse. The relationships between citizens, information, and action are constantly changing as new media and technologies expand. Proliferating cable channels and interactive digital technologies offer those who seek diverse views more ways to learn and get involved in government, politics, and civic life. However, most citizens remain connected to conventional sources such as television for their information, and receive relatively little information that sticks or that motivates even minimal actions such as voting. Politicians and their media consultants find it difficult to make an impression on distracted citizens in noisy environments, particularly as mass national audiences fragment into cable niches and 24/7 “fast food” news outlets.

The amount of money required to reach citizens with political messages has spiraled upward and now dominates political campaigns. Television formats favor short, emotional appeals over reasoned, thoughtful debate. The levels of managed news, spin, and journalistic punditry feed perceptions of bias in the news. However, the typical claims of liberal or conservative bias are most often in the eyes of the beholder. Deeper biases reflected in sensationalism or the dependence on official sources for information often leave citizens confused about issues and unsure what they can do. Will interactive communication technologies stimulate more engagement? Can young people, in particular, be better prepared for the overwhelming media environment in which they live? This short primer on media politics offers ideas about areas of importance for instruction on media literacy and civic engagement for the K–12 civic-education curriculum.

Viewing the News

Across all age demographics, Americans favor television for their political information. Roughly 75 percent of all Americans regularly watch some form of TV news, compared to 63 percent citing regular newspaper use and 46 percent listening to news on the radio. Young people disproportionately choose local TV news over other sources, yet local news is often of poor quality. During elections, for example, campaign ads get more air time than actual news reports on campaigns, which may explain why many people say they are more informed by political ads than by the news. There are signs that young people may be breaking with these patterns, but they need greater guidance in their alternative media choices. For example, between 2000 and 2004, young citizens ages 18–29

reduced their reliance on TV news for their election information. Where did they go? Rivaling TV news are various comedy shows, such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, and *Saturday Night Live*, now representing the main source of election information for 21 percent of young citizens. A more promising trend is that Internet use has grown to rival TV news and comedy shows, cited by 20 percent of young people as their main source of campaign news. Those who rely on the Internet are among the most informed about politics, and the Internet may be reversing the aversion to political news.



What Is News?

What we call news is constantly changing. Mainstream news today is heavily commercialized, meaning that it must attract audiences for advertisers. The profit formulas that drive the news business today make it enticing for news stations to present packaged information provided by government and business as news, mixed with the journalistic sensationalism that attracts a larger audience. Beyond natural disasters and breaking events, the news tends to portray events as they are defined by officials and authorities, based on information that is produced and



spun by public-relations professionals. At times, journalists appear to be political insiders, leaving government to police itself. At other times, news organizations engage in feeding frenzies, spurring each other with escalating scandal coverage that often lacks perspective. The advent of the 24-hour news cycle has produced an odd mix of repetition and competition for new angles on stories, leading news organizations to advance stories through sensation, speculation, and spin. Citizens must be able to deconstruct this alternately managed and frenzied news in order to make sound judgments about their society and government.

Follow the Money

The information most Americans receive through campaign advertising is often decisive in determining voting choices. Issue ads often sway public opinion in important matters such as health care and education. The targeting of relatively small blocs of swing voters in fewer than 20 battleground states now defines communication in American elections. The power of advertising in American politics is matched only by the escalating amounts of money that pour into parties and interest campaigns that shape elections and national policy debates. Despite various reform efforts, each election has topped the breathtaking spending of the last. The presidential candidates in 2000 spent roughly \$528 million trying to reach voters, who reported relatively little interest until they awakened after the election to discover



that it was not clear who won. Presidential election spending from the campaigns, the parties, and affiliated advocacy groups may top \$1 billion in 2004, including the large sums spent by advocacy groups operating outside the funding limits. The saturation of American politics with advertising also introduces an overtone of negativity and cynicism into our politics. People report that they do not like this tone, but market research shows that it works to arouse emotions and fears that affect how people behave politically. Even when negativity works, it reduces people's sense of efficacy or control over their political environment. Among the most important contributions that K-12 educators can make in civics education is to help young people understand the uses of advertising in general, and the ways in which political advertising affects our views and public behaviors.

Internet Campaigning

The Internet has become an important medium for raising money, building support networks, and reaching hard-to-target voters such as young people. The first breakthrough with the Internet came in the 2000 presidential primaries when John McCain raised large amounts through small online donations. In 2004, Howard Dean not only set fundraising records, but used social technologies such as Meetup to grow his base and enable supporters to interact with campaign staff. Campaigns now buy large electronic



databases from data-mining outfits that assemble detailed personal profiles based on bits of information that people provide in commercial transactions, public records, and Web-site visits. In 2000, the firm Map Applications assembled detailed records on 1.5 million registered voters in Iowa to determine which issues most favored Republican outcomes. Another data-mining firm, Aristotle International, claims to have assembled individual records on 150 million individual voters, and includes 90 percent of the U.S. Senate among its client list.

Online Activism

A resurgence of citizen engagement may be signaled by the proliferation of online activism sites. Organizations across the political spectrum are learning how to find and stay in touch with supporters of their causes. Conservative action networks use lists and e-mail alerts to mobilize voters and apply pressure to public officials. The California recall election of Democratic Governor Gray Davis was aided by talk-radio hosts who drove listeners to Web sites where they could contribute money and sign petitions. The progressive organization MoveOn.org has developed a large support base that has been mobilized to send mes-

sages to candidates during presidential campaigns and to express opposition to the war in Iraq. Smart mobs—spontaneous swarms of activists coordinated through text messages or e-mail—have been credited with bringing greater focus to demonstrations such as those against the World Trade Organization in Seattle in 1999, and more recently against the war in Iraq.



Interactive Citizens

The communication technologies that drive the Web enable citizens to explore new forms of interaction with each other, and with leaders and governments. Weblogs turn people into commentators on news of the day. High-quality sites such as OneWorld TV stream citizen-produced video on a range of political topics. Youth-oriented online communities such as TakingITGlobal offer young people new ways to interact around civic issues with peers nationally or even internationally. Interactivity, chats, and multimedia student productions can enliven civic education as well. For example, Student Voices: Seattle offers students up-to-date information about local politics in the form of online articles, resources, and dialogs. Student Voices also teamed with the Seattle

Channel to produce local cable programs featuring high-school students interviewing community leaders, and make them available on demand to teachers and students at home or in the classroom via a Web site archive. Civic officials such as the mayor, the police chief, the superintendent of schools, and the president of the city council made virtual visits to multiple classrooms through these videos. Because the program content is student driven, these projects offer personal portraits of public officials who are too often viewed by students as unreachable.



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