



March 2010

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Recommended Citation

West, Darrell (2010) "The News Media Revolution: What It Means for Politics and You," *Sacred Heart University Review*. Vol. 23: Iss. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/shureview/vol23/iss1/5>

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The News Media Revolution: What It Means for Politics and You

Cover Page Footnote

Darrell M. West is the John Hazen White Professor of Political Science and Public Policy at Brown University. This is a lightly-edited version of a talk delivered on March 24, 2004, at Sacred Heart University as part of the College of Arts and Sciences Lecture Series on Media and Society.

DARRELL WEST

*The News Media Revolution:
What It Means for Politics and You*

Today I want to talk about the intersection of politics and the American mass media, and I want to discuss what I see happening in the contemporary situation and talk a little about how those changes affect the political process as well as the functioning of society. The focal point of my talk about the American mass media is revolution, and I have to say at the onset that this is probably an unusual approach for somebody who is talking about American society. So let me just briefly discuss what I mean, because when you think about revolution, you generally think about large-scale societal upheavals, such as the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, or our very own American Revolution of 1776. By revolution, we're talking about a series of events that transform a society and politics of the day. What I'm going to argue today is that what is happening with our contemporary media actually is akin to a revolution, in the sense that there are broad-based changes that are taking place which, in their cumulative impact, are transforming how we acquire information and the more general role that reporters play in our society. These changes affect how we relate to one another, how our society and culture function, and the manner in which our political system operates. Some of the changes that I'll be talking about are technological in nature, for example, the shift from radio and television to Internet delivery systems; some of

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them are functions of economic changes, specifically the degree of market competition faced by news organization; still others of them just refer to changes in how the media cover things. The cumulative effect of all these changes, I'm going to argue, is a major transformation in our system.

Let me talk about some of the fundamental ways in which our news media system have changed in recent years. I think one of the most important changes that has taken place comes in regard to newspapers. Let me ask a simple question: How many of you today read a newspaper? And by reading a newspaper, I mean the print version of a newspaper. Raise your hand, don't be embarrassed. OK, we have about I'd say maybe 20 or 25 percent of this audience who've raised their hand. And by the way, many of the people who raised their hands I would estimate were over the age of 40. We'll come back to that point in a minute. This audience is actually very typical, because today about 20% of Americans read the print version of a daily newspaper. These numbers are down dramatically from fifty years ago. For example, in 1950, about 40% of Americans read a daily newspaper. Now that number has dropped by half. In my book, *The Rise and Fall of the Media Establishment*, I looked at newspaper circulation levels going back to the late 1700s, and found that there have been huge fluctuations in newspaper readership levels during that time period.

If you go back to the very earliest point in American history, almost nobody read newspapers: about 5% in the late 1700s and early 1800s read a paper. Newspaper reading at that point was very much an elite activity of the wealthy and the powerful. But then we saw lots of changes in the press. There was the rise of the penny-press, during the 1800s and the first half of the 1800s, increasing educational levels in America, and a drop in the price of newspapers, and so, not surprisingly, readership levels increased. They reached a high in 1950 of 37%. They have dropped steadily since then, in part due to the fact that 1950 was about the time that television came in. So we saw a shift from people relying on newspapers to more people relying on television.

Second, think about the world of newspaper competition. In 1923, 61% of American cities – almost two-thirds of American cities – had two or more daily newspapers. It was not at all uncommon at the

turn of the twentieth century for there to be serious newspaper rivalries within individual cities. Major metropolitan areas, such as New York and Chicago, had multiple papers, each attempting to scoop the other, and each acting as a check on the coverage of its opponents. Today, less than 2% of American cities have more than one daily newspaper. The story of the twentieth century in the American newspaper world has been newspapers going bankrupt, newspapers merging, and basically the elimination of competition between newspapers.

Third, there's been a fundamental change in who is reading newspapers, as illustrated by my very brief example of survey research today. When you go back to the 1960s, basically many Americans, regardless of age group, read a daily newspaper. There really wasn't a big difference between young people, middle-aged people, and senior citizens in newspaper readership. Today, the pattern could not be more dramatically different. For example, people 60 years and older read newspapers at the same rate as senior citizens did forty years ago. But young people don't read newspapers anymore. There's been almost a 40 percentage point drop in newspaper readership just among the 18-29 year-old audience. Obviously young people are still getting information, but it's not from newspapers. They are relying much more heavily on other media; it used to be television, now it's electronic systems, the Internet in particular.

Then think about what has happened in regard to television, and particularly the television networks. Again, to try to provide a historical framework here, in the 1970s, 91% of American television viewers watched ABC, CBS, or NBC, mainly because those were the only options. Today, of course, Americans have more viewing options than ever before, with the rise of cable. My digital cable system today has about 200 channels. Of course I only watch four or five of them, but it's great to have 200 – even if you're not watching 195 of them. There are new television networks, Fox being a prime example. It used to be that when you turned on the television at 6 P.M., you had to watch the news, because that was the only thing that was on. Today, if you turn on the television, and you have cable, at 6 P.M., you can watch the local news, but you can also watch old situation comedies, *Star Trek*, wrestling, sports, old movies, Jerry Springer, you name it. And not surprisingly, when you offer people that kind of choice, many people are migrating out of the conventional choices, particularly news and

politics, to culture and entertainment. And so there's a major change not just in the world of newspapers and how they are functioning and who's reading them, but in television as well.

Of course the big technological change now has been the Internet. That has really emerged full force in the last decade, in terms of news and entertainment, although the funny thing is, in the early 1990s, people didn't see the Internet as a very revolutionary force. For example, when Bill Gates wrote his autobiography, published in 1995, he barely mentioned the Internet, which was actually very surprising, because by 1995 the Internet had emerged and people were paying great attention to it. But in his autobiography, he was not really into the Internet. A couple of years later, though, when a revised edition of that very same book came out, suddenly there were discussions about the Internet that were added throughout the book. So by 1997, he had realized that Microsoft was missing the boat and Microsoft then jumped into Internet delivery systems.

It used to be that when there was a breaking story — an assassination or war or any major economic event — people would turn to television: for example, the Kennedy assassination in 1963, a very critical event for society. People were tuned to television. But think about the 2002 election crisis and the Florida recount. People turned to the Internet for the latest information. There was a dramatic change in where people go their information and how they got it.

The last part of the media revolution that I want to discuss really refers more specifically to how the news media function, how they cover events, how they cover elections, how they cover the world of politics. What we find is the tabloidization of the American media. We have seen the emergence of tabloid TV shows. If you want a good test, when you are talking to somebody and they say something, some reference to something that is going on, ask them where they heard about what they just said. You actually find that people have great difficulty distinguishing where they get information. I was once talking to my mother on the telephone, and she made a negative comment about Mario Cuomo, then the Governor of New York. I didn't believe what she said, but I was curious where she got the information, and so I said, ``Mom, where did you hear this negative thing about Mario Cuomo?" and she said, ``Oh it was either on the NBC Nightly News or *Hard Copy*. In my mother's hometown, the news runs at 6:30 and

Hard Copy comes on at 7, so you know the TV's on for an hour. She wasn't sure where she had gotten the information.

What is happening today, which is very interesting, is that you have a lot of tabloid news outlets. This is not new in and of itself: you can go back twenty, thirty, forty years, and we always had the *Inquirer* and various tabloid outlets. But what is happening today is that the tabloids have really moved from the periphery to the core. If you think about some of the big news stories just of the last decade, and who broke those stories, many of them were not broken by ABC, NBC, CBS, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, or the Associated Press, basically the elite press. These things were broken by various tabloid outlets. And not surprisingly we are seeing the rising tabloidization of the American press affecting the mainstream media, what in my book I call the Establishment press.

My favorite example of this took place during the 2000 presidential election. There's an obscure tabloid, a newspaper called the *Weekly World News*, and in 2000 it ran a story entitled "Space Alien Backs Bush for President," and they had a picture of an alien shaking hands with Republican candidate George W. Bush, and the alien offering an endorsement of the Republican candidate. Now, this is not the first time we have seen this. The same thing happened in 1992 with Clinton. They obviously doctored the picture of the alien and Democratic candidate Clinton, but the key difference was that this time the story was picked up and reported by the *New York Times*, which is where I saw it. I don't want you to think that I read the *Weekly World News*. They showed a picture of Bush holding a tabloid newspaper with the story entitled "Support From Far Away," and then they quoted Bush joking that yes, he had gotten the alien endorsement, and that demonstrated that "I'm willing to reach across certain demographic lines." From my standpoint, this really kind of tells it all, because what we are seeing is that tabloidization is no longer limited to the tabloids. You know, there's no more staid institution in America, no more elite institution in America, than the *New York Times*. They don't often start scandals or are not the first outlet to cover things, but when the tabloids pick up on something and start reporting it, it generally doesn't take very many news cycles before ABC runs it, the *Times* runs it, and it becomes a real story. We saw that with the Jennifer Flowers scandal for Clinton in 1992. The

Monica Lewinsky charge first surfaced through the *Drudge Report* and then was picked up by the mainstream press. We've seen lots of examples of this.

So there have been a lot of different changes: changes in newspapers, changes in the television network audience, changes in the way that reporters cover events. And when you add all these things together, I suggest that we are actually seeing a contemporary revolution in the news media.

Now how does this affect the political process, and how does it affect you as news consumers? I think that it's difficult to answer these questions because we're still in the middle of the revolution, and one of the things we know from looking back at the French Revolution or the Russian Revolution is that it's really hard, when you are in the middle of a revolution, to figure out what's going on, and what the consequences are going to be, and where the revolution is going to go. Many of you, I'm sure, have read about and studied the French Revolution, and that went through incredible gyrations of wildly differing sorts before we finally ended up with . . . Bonaparte. Who would have guessed that? Get rid of the king and you end up with a military dictator.

So revolutions do have this odd way of kind of going out of control or moving in directions that one would not expect. But I think in terms of the media revolution, there are a few things that already are apparent, and these things are having incredible consequences for the political process and for contemporary elections as well. The first thing that I think is evident is the declining power of the media establishment. I teach a class at Brown on the mass media. Almost every student that comes into my class basically accepts or believes what I call a media determinism argument, meaning that they think the media are really powerful, the media shape perceptions, the media control what you think, the media are the purveyors of cultural values, and so on. There certainly is some validity to that, but what I tell them in my course — and this is always controversial: they always spend a lot of time arguing with me, and I'd be happy to argue with you here today about this in a few minutes — is this: that the media establishment, as we used to know it in the United States, actually is in decline and does not have nearly the control over public opinion, the course of government, or even the course of elections that we often attribute to it.

In political science, for example, about twenty years ago there was a very prominent book written by a political scientist, a very good scholar named Tom Patterson, titled *The Mass Media Election*, and he essentially made the argument that elections have become media events, that the media influence what you think about and how you think and how you evaluate the candidates. The reporters are the new gatekeepers, and if you don't satisfy the press, you are going to be a losing candidate, and so on. What I argue is that, although there certainly are ways in which the media continue to be very important and there certainly are individual examples, which I would readily admit demonstrate continuing media power, in general the media establishment is much less powerful today than it was ten or twenty years ago. There have been a number of different things that have come together, basically consequences of this media revolution that I just outlined, that in their cumulative impact have reduced the power of the American media.

For example, let's go back to the television networks, and the fact that in the 1970s almost everybody watching television at any given point in time was watching ABC, NBC, and CBS. There were lots of studies at the time, content analysis of the news coverage, that basically showed it didn't matter if you watched ABC, CBS, or NBC. There was a professionalism in the news world; they tended to cover things in the same way. In fact, the term "pack journalism" reflected the belief that basically it really didn't matter: there weren't big differences within the media, because essentially it was an oligopoly that controlled the media: there were three networks, and they all covered things in pretty much the same way. When they ganged up on somebody, like when they ganged up on Nixon during Watergate or when they turned critical of Johnson during the Vietnam War, you were in big trouble. You as a politician would not be able to survive that. Today, we don't see the same thing. There's been a splintering of the television audience. There are lots of other options besides ABC, NBC, and CBS. You have CNN, you have Fox, you have MSNBC, you have C-SPAN if you are really crazy for the news. There are all of these viewing audiences. You have the rise of talk radio and Rush Limbaugh, and now Al Franken is trying to create the liberal version of Rush Limbaugh. So the cohesiveness and the homogeneity of the news coverage in American media that we used to be able to document

actually is no more. There are more options. There's a wider range from very conservative to very liberal, depending on the outlet. With the Internet you get incredible fluctuations, everything from fascists and Nazis to socialists and communists and beyond. And so there's been dramatic changes in that regard.

There's a very different source credibility, in terms of the American media today that, again, I'm going to argue, undermines the power of the media to be influential at election time and in the governing process. When you go back to the 1960s and the early 1970s, some of you may have read about the time when Walter Cronkite was reputed to be the most trusted man in America, and there were some surveys that came out to document that. The surveys were actually a little bogus, but the basic point was true: that American journalists, during the time of Vietnam and Watergate, accumulated an incredibly high level of what social psychologists call source credibility. We saw them as believable. We trusted them. And when you have a highly trusted and believable source, you are far more likely to be persuaded by those individuals. So the thinking was that when Cronkite kind of turned against the Vietnam War and started arching his eyebrows when he was reading the news, viewers could kind of take a cue that, wait a minute, something's wrong with Vietnam, and then the country went in a different direction.

Today, when you look at public opinion surveys about the American news media, they have been subjected to the very same decline in trustworthiness and source credibility that has afflicted almost every major institution, from Congress and the presidency and political parties to even colleges and universities and religious institutions. We're all a lot more cynical today than we used to be, for a lot of different reasons, and the media have really been affected by that as well. There have been public opinion surveys that suggest that large numbers of Americans don't trust journalists anymore. They think journalists are out for themselves, that they get the facts wrong, that they're overly sensationalistic. We saw a lot of examples of this, for example, during the Clinton presidency. When the Monica Lewinsky charges first surfaced, there were people in the first couple weeks of that who basically said Clinton is dead. There's no way he is going to survive this. A sex scandal in the Oval Office of the White House: how could somebody survive that type of scandal? In fact, Clinton ended

up being impeached, although he was not removed from office. But think about public opinion on the Clinton presidency. During that whole year of saturation, negative news coverage towards the Clinton presidency, Clinton's job approval rating did not drop below 60%. People still thought he was doing a good job: even though they didn't necessarily trust him and didn't respect the way he conducted his personal life, they thought he was doing a good job as president. If you compare that to Nixon during Watergate, Nixon's numbers went into the toilet. His trustworthiness, his job approval ratings, how we thought about how he was handling the economy, all turned very negative, and Nixon was forced from office. Not only was Clinton *not* forced from office, despite being impeached: he retained his popularity almost all the way to the end of his presidency.

That case helps us to understand what is going on with the media: the media can report negative stories about politicians; they can say that John Kerry takes botox or that Bush made up the whole weapons of mass destruction thing, but people are not persuaded by the media in the same way that they were thirty and forty years ago. The source credibility of journalists is way down. We don't have the same confidence in the messenger. And if you don't trust the messenger, you're not going to be nearly as persuaded by the message.

And so what I suggest is that these changes that I'm calling a revolution in the American news media have decreased the power of the media. The media have less ability to set the agenda. There's a less homogenous press: we now have Rush Limbaugh and Fox TV on the one hand and Al Franken on the other. There's less institutional clout in the press. Yesterday at Brown we had Howard Fineman, the chief political correspondent of *Newsweek*, for a talk, and he mentioned how politicians used to leak to him, and then he would write his stories for *Newsweek*. Today, the politicians, including the White House, leak to Matt Drudge, and then Matt Drudge runs the story. Drudge, for example, was the one who broke the alleged botox story in regard to John Kerry, and then the mainstream press had to decide whether or not to follow up on it. And then there was the "bimbo eruption" with John Kerry, which again Matt Drudge was the first to report, and the mainstream media went through incredible soul-searching: Should we report this? Is this a real story? Is Kerry like Clinton in that regard?

And so there are lots of changes that, I suggest, in their cumulative

impact have had profound consequences for the ways reporters cover elections, cover politics, and cover American society. I actually think that the American media are at a very crucial crossroads now, in terms of their own future. I'll close with this argument: that the media are at this crossroads because when you look at the trendline over the last twenty or thirty years, there's been a steady drop in virtually every dimension in terms of how people think about the American media. People are far less satisfied with the press, are much more critical of how the press covers things, and when you look at the high citizen dissatisfaction, you can see that there are some things that are emerging that are actually highly problematic from the perspective of our traditional belief in a free news media as a crucial part of the democratic process.

For example, we're seeing much tougher libel laws going into effect. It used to be that it was nearly impossible to prove libel or slander. If you didn't like the way a TV story or newspaper reporter covered something, you could sue them, but you would almost never win. Today there are people who are winning these lawsuits. There are far higher jury awards being lodged against the American media. Today the media on average are winning only about 39% of these cases when people are filing suits. And recently we've had a number of cases of reporters who have been found to have made up things: Jason Blair for the *New York Times*, a reporter for *USA Today*, and so on. There's a pattern emerging indicating that people are unhappy with the American media: they don't trust them, they think they're making things up, and there actually have been cases where reporters *did* make things up. And so you're starting to get tougher laws against the media, more jury awards against them.

As a political scientist, I worry that from the standpoint of democracy, we're actually at a dangerous point. I complain about the media just as much as everyone. There are lots of things that I dislike. But the free press is crucially vital for the safeguarding of democracy. There was a book written a while ago by Bruce Stanford, who suggested that as awful as the press may behave at times, we are much better off relying on them than the government for our liberties. Traditionally in democratic theory, reporters have played the role of providing an early warning signal for voters. They're the ones that do the investigating, they're the ones that tip us off. We don't really pay

attention to the political process. Most Americans are consumed by friends, family, jobs, and other such things, and so we need somebody who's watching out for our interests. And traditionally the media have been part of that watchdog role. Today, there is so much public cynicism that the traditional watchdog role on the part of the American press is in great danger of being eroded.

The last thing that I want to leave you with is that I think there is actually great danger in becoming too cynical about the press. What I try to teach my students is that it's okay to be skeptical but it is not okay to be cynical. The distinction is that being cynical is just basically rejecting everything the media do. I suggest to my students that they should be skeptical, that they should be informed consumers, they should rely on multiple sources. When I think about the media, I don't trust any one outlet anymore, even a venerable institution like the *New York Times*. I read four or five newspapers, I listen to NPR, and I try to get information from a variety of different sources. You have to do that, really, to protect yourself. It's certainly good to be skeptical, but don't get so cynical about the press that we actually undermine the watchdog role that the press plays in American democracy.