



## After Broadcast News: Media Regimes, Democracy, and the New Information Environment, by Bruce A. Williams and Michael X. Delli Carpini

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*Reviewed by* AMBER E. BOYDSTUN

My guess is that most media scholars have shared some version of the following experience: A fellow airplane passenger asks you what you do. Perhaps you dodge the question, or lie outright, saying you study the mating behaviors of sage grouse (no judgment). But if instead you admit to being a researcher/scholar/professor of media and politics, your fellow passenger sits up, energized. What tends to follow is one of two main lines of conversation: Said fellow passenger either cannot understand how our media system got to “where it is today” or espouses unequivocal expertise on how our media system got to “where it is today.” Both conversations can be exciting and enlightening, if sometimes uncomfortable (oh, for non-politically charged conversations about bird sex). And both conversations tend to come down, in the end, to the quality of the information provided by “the media” to the public in today’s world.

Talking with undergraduates about media and politics often elicits these same two lines of response—either disillusioned befuddlement or vehement opinion about how our media system got to where it is today. And here, too, the impetus tends to lie in the quality of the information the media provide. Thankfully, an undergraduate course affords more time than an airplane trip to unpack some important assumptions. One key assumption worth examining is whether we, in fact, have anything resembling a good understanding of “where our media system is today.” Where is that exactly? Another key assumption worth questioning is that, in evaluating the quality of media information, we need to draw a hard line between “the news” (e.g., *New York Times*, *CBS Evening News*) and “entertainment” (e.g., *Saturday Night Live*, *The Daily Show*). Is this dichotomy a meaningful one?

Scholars, students, and fellow airplane passengers alike will benefit from reading Williams and Delli Carpini’s book. It offers a detailed yet strikingly clear overarching view of how our media system got to where it is today and, of equal importance, just where that place is (and isn’t). Specifically, it illustrates the value of thinking not in terms of news media versus entertainment media but rather about the importance of politically relevant information regardless of the source. Indeed, the book should be required reading for political communication students (and tucked into airplane seatbacks in lieu of SkyMall, *gratis*).

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Williams and Delli Carpini describe the evolution of America's media system as defined by different "regimes," the most recent of which was the Age of Broadcast News. Since the destabilization of the Broadcast News regime, no clear regime has emerged. We are, in other words, in uncharted waters—exciting, and not a little bit scary. The authors' central argument is that in order to understand this new world of media and whatever regime it might develop into, we must understand not only the media regimes of the past but also, crucially, how the premises on which we have understood those past regimes do—and do not—apply today.

The fact that we are not yet in a clear new media regime is a rare occurrence. Historically, Williams and Delli Carpini explain, "It is only during critical junctures" when the implicit collusion between consumers and producers "is disrupted by political, economic, cultural, and technological changes . . . that the naturalness of an existing media regime becomes contested, opening up a new struggle over how best to define the role of the media, and ultimately of citizens, in a democratic society" (pp. 20–21). Put another way, we are at this moment not in a typical period of change, transitioning from one solid media regime to another in response to the variety of complex institutional and social forces we have worked hard as scholars to understand. Rather, the particular upheaval of politics, culture, and technology at the turn of the twenty-first century has thrust us into a period of change without a clear direction or landing place. What type of media regime will come next will depend on a variety of factors, including some not yet given due consideration by scholars. Moreover, the nature of the next media regime will hinge on how journalists, citizens, and policymakers debate core questions about what the media's role *should* be in politics and society. "How these debates are resolved," Williams and Delli Carpini write, "will determine the shape of democratic politics and political communications in the emerging media regime" (p. 21). Thus, in tackling the question of where we are today and how we got here, the authors have the rare opportunity—perhaps even obligation—to address the normative implications of how we think about media and politics.

Williams and Delli Carpini begin in Chapter 1 by hooking readers with a lively discussion of how nontraditional media signals (e.g., Tina Fey's impersonations of Sarah Palin on *Saturday Night Live* during the 2008 election) are just as meaningful for citizens' political views as are traditional media signals (e.g., Katie Couric's pivotal 2008 interview with Palin on CBS).

The authors then take us back in time through an enticing history of media and politics in America in Chapters 2 and 3. A historical approach is exactly what is needed here, and those readers with, let us say, an emotional allergy to history books should not be discouraged. Going back through the regimes of media past offers, for example, an important reminder of how the American media system developed certainly not by accident, but also not in an obvious, uncontested way; had political winds blown a different direction, other media systems could have developed, producing other media regimes than those America has experienced. We are reminded, for example, of the pivotal role Walter Lippmann played in both Progressive Era media and our scholarly understanding of media and politics more broadly.

And while the authors lay out their historical discussion with an eye toward the big picture of understanding how each media regime came and went, they also treat us to exciting micro-level tidbits. For instance, the authors remind us that what we now call the op-ed page originated in the form of essays by outside contributors to the *New York American* that were printed on the page opposite the editor's opinion page (p. 59). As another example, in discussing shifting journalistic norms of representing reality to readers and viewers, the authors offer a behind-the-scenes view of how, in 2006, *CBS Evening News* anchor Bob

Schieffer was relegated to broadcasting the show from cramped, dingy quarters while the main studio was being readied for Katie Couric's debut as the new anchor. A projected background image gave viewers the sense that Schieffer was broadcasting from a more professional studio. Williams and Delli Carpini describe how, "on his last night as anchor in September 2006, Schieffer wanted to let the viewers in on this secret by dropping the background image, but CBS News president Sean McManus ultimately decided against it, worried that it might leave the 'impression that we go around phonying up stuff all the time'" (p. 53).

In Chapter 4, the authors offer their view of the current media landscape, focusing on the need for a better definition of politically relevant information—one that focuses on the information rather than the context. Here is the definition they provide: "Politically relevant media shape opportunities for understanding, deliberating, and acting on (1) the conditions of one's everyday life, (2) the life of fellow community members, and (3) the norms and structures of power that shape these relationships" (p. 122). Politically relevant media, then, can come in the form of a newspaper story, a TV report, a comedy routine, a citizen journalist's blog, or a film, to name a few. Yes, even *The Simpsons* and *American Idol* (p. 123). This single definition—and the grounded theory Williams and Delli Carpini pack behind it—should change the way we think about (and teach) media and politics.

Mapping this approach onto three case studies, in Chapters 5, 6, and 7 the authors examine the Clinton scandals, the climate-change debate, and the 9/11 attacks and invasion of Iraq. These chapters are smartly written, and could stand alone as student reading assignments. I found Chapter 6 to be an especially compelling application of the authors' theoretical approach, offering a concrete illustration of the benefits and pitfalls of today's shifting media landscape. Here, we see the failures (and some successes) of traditional media to give the type of attention and urgency to an important issue we might want and, simultaneously, the galvanizing role non-news sources can play in communicating relevant political information to the public: for example, the 2004 blockbuster *The Day After Tomorrow* and ABC's "Planet Earth 2000," hosted by actor Leonardo DiCaprio.

In Chapter 8, the authors outline four criteria for evaluating our new media environment: transparency, or people's ability "to know who is speaking to them" (p. 289); pluralism, or "the openness of the media environment to diverse points of view and the equal accessibility of these different views" (p. 295); verisimilitude, or "the likelihood or probability of truth" (p. 303); and practice, which encapsulates both "preparing citizens for political and civic engagement through the media's ability to model and be a place to rehearse such behavior" and also increasingly being "the place where such political engagement occurs" (p. 309). The authors conclude with a call for a national dialogue about the role of journalism in America.

In summary, Williams and Delli Carpini's book pushes us to change the way we think about the media in order to account for the rapid and revolutionary changes the media environment is undergoing. Increasingly, the absolute (and arbitrary) dichotomy between news and entertainment is a poor fit for scholars' understanding—and citizens' experience—of media today. By pushing us to open our thinking about political communication, this book alerts us to the varied ramifications of how our new media environment might unfold.