

An Interview with E. J. Dionne, Jr.

Charles T. Mathewes

In the past several decades, there's been a remarkable proliferation of media outlets and producers. What do you think have been the good and bad effects of this, especially in terms of the variety of new technological forms of the media—talk radio, cable TV, the web, and, most recently, book blogs and *YouTube*?

We've gone through an extraordinary set of transformations in a very short time. From the Kennedy campaign in 1960 through the '88 presidential campaign, campaigns reflected the shift away from radio and newspapers that had dominated campaigns in the 1930s and 1940s toward the power of television, reflected largely through the three major networks. For that period, most of what candidates did was designed to play especially on the half-hour news show from 6:30 to 7:00 or 7:00 to 7:30.

Then you went through the revolution of the late eighties and early nineties. Two things happened: the rise of cable television and the 24-hour news cycle, which took power away from the campaigns because it's much harder to manage a 24-hour news cycle; and then the rise of talk radio, which was in large part conservative talk radio.

We've seen a blurring of the lines between neutral journalism, opinionated journalism, and partisan politics, and I think that goes all the way back to chat shows on television where the booking of guests is mixed. You might have a non-partisan journalist, a conservative (or liberal) political consultant, and a liberal

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(or conservative) columnist. All of these roles have been blurred, and there's a disadvantage to that because there's a lot going on that is not fully disclosed. On the other hand, I think at this point people who watch this kind of thing are quite sophisticated and know who is what.

What do you think about the vast expansion of the media market in terms of the explosion of more overtly partisan outlets?

I think that we have to look at the historical trajectory of journalism in America. We forget that our initial media were all partisan outlets. The first two newspapers in Washington, one Hamiltonian and one Jeffersonian, were set up to argue with each other. Through most of the nineteenth century, there was no idea of objectivity. The press was a mobilizing medium. It was a party medium. It was financed by parties or the government advertising you got when your party won. It wasn't until the late 1870s, 1880s, that Pulitzer and others discovered that you could actually make more money selling to a mass audience than to a partisan audience, and newspapers started telling stories. Instead of representing the interest of your party, you made your money by selling advertising to people who wanted to reach this mass audience. That was the economic base of non-partisan journalism. Then you have Walter Lippmann come along with his forceful critique of partisan journalism and making a strong case for objectivity. What we became accustomed to from the 1920s to the 1980s was a new development, and what you're seeing now is a partial return to the tradition of a partisan press. Many of these new outlets are simply a reappearance of this form.

Now, I've always been fascinated by the debate between John Dewey and Walter Lippmann in the '20s. I'm going to over-simplify two very interesting arguments, but if Lippmann believed that the first task was to provide information to a citizen who then becomes engaged, Dewey believed that engagement itself produced the thirst for information. You need to save the best of the Lippmann ethic with a dose of Dewey. I think what's happening now is you're getting your dose of Dewey. The old media were in a sense demobilizing. A journalist couldn't say, "I'm in this because I really think it's important that you vote Democratic or Republican." Often, fairness involved bashing both sides equally. That's fundamentally demobilizing.

This new journalism is designed to say: "this fight matters." With the complexity of the web, you can have reporting of both sorts: non-partisan reporting and approaches that organize people on behalf of causes. Yes, it's a further blurring of lines and that can be problematic. But I think that the coexistence of these two forms of media is actually good for democracy.

The difficulty is the economic trouble facing the media forms that finance reporting designed to provide independent information. That's why I'm worried that it's going to take a while for the older media to figure out new economic forms to support reporting. People forget how expensive it is to keep somebody in Iraq or how expensive it is to free a person to do two or three months of investigative reporting on an important topic. Even though I am a defender of the new media and think it is a positive development, I really do not want to lose the reporting capacity that is part of the so-called old media.

Cass Sunstein argues that the way the media and public discourse have been

reconfigured in the past few decades allows people to hear only what they want to hear from the media, and it more deeply confirms their experience of the world in a way that renders more and more implausible alternative voices or counter voices. What do you think about that, both technologically and institutionally, and do you think that's a reasonable account of what's going on?

There's clearly something to what Cass Sunstein says. If you choose to, you can spend your time listening to *Radio America* or reading *Daily Kos* and *Talking Points Memo* and staying away from the other side. Or you can listen to Rush, read *Power Line* or *Captain's Quarters*, and so on. So there's some truth to that, although what fascinates me about this new media is that they often do their thing by linking to news stories that appear in other media, and that can send someone off on a search that might lead in rather unpredictable directions.

Also, these media spend a lot of time fighting each other and attacking each other, which means they have to link back and forth and so, again, that can send somebody over to a point of view that they disagree with. On the whole, it does mean that we may have, at least in the short term, less common discourse. The advantage of the old 6:30 news is that the whole country had a common set of facts and information to argue about and engage on, but you have to ask the question: is the ability to limit the debate in that way actually a good thing or are we better off to have this free-wheeling open debate? Even though I miss common conversation, I still think it's an improvement to have a vast array of information and forms of argument readily available to people. So while I think Cass has a point—I always hesitate to disagree with Cass—I'm probably less worried than he is about these developments and more optimistic about how this will develop over the long run.

So they're inadvertently or parasitically non-partisan, these blogs, because they have to link to these other things that they live off of. And they actually get their diet of facts from these old media, non-partisan kind of sites.

Right, and that's also true, by the way, of talk radio. Rush Limbaugh would have a lot more trouble putting together a show if he didn't have the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* to quote or attack or both. I joke that on Rush's show my first name is often "Even" because every once in a while Limbaugh will say: "Even E. J. Dionne concedes that..."

Do you think that the media inevitably or necessarily amplify the extremes and ignore the middle? Do the media in some ways play up the voices on the two sides far more than the middle ground?

I think it's particularly true on social and cultural questions. The media have trouble presenting a middle ground partly because these so-called extremes have a certain moral clarity. If you have a staunch pro-choicer against a staunch right-to-lifer, you know you will get a real exchange. Most Americans have some ambivalent views about abortion, even if they tilt pro-choice or pro-life, but ambivalence doesn't carry well in a five-minute discussion, so I think there is—

—antagonism over ambivalence?

Right. Antagonism is almost always more interesting in media terms. There is a kind of built-in bias towards conflict. On the question of media bias, I think the true biases of the established media are those of the educated, upper middle class. So if you were to generalize, the bias tends to be somewhat more liberal on the social and cultural issues but rather moderate, even sometimes conservative, on economic issues. The two things you might not want to be in confronting a reporter are an evangelical preacher or a union shop steward.

What effect have these changes in the media had on the public discourse of politicians? In other words, in the past couple of decades, how have these new technologies and new institutional arrangements with the media shaped or altered how politicians think in public?

I think that the 1960–90 period really promoted the search for the sound bite and that when politicians or their staffs wrote speeches, they were very conscious of which sound bite might make the news. I think you may be seeing, thanks to the new media forms, a revival of the speech itself as a form of communication. To take an example: Obama’s speech on race was not a sound bite-oriented speech, or if there were sound bites, there were a lot of different sound bites that could come out of it. But thanks to YouTube, a very large number of Americans—the last time I looked at this, somewhere around a million or a million and a half—clicked on the entire speech, and I’m sure more have seen it since then. Here is a case where the new technologies might revive one of the oldest forms of political discourse, which would be a very good thing because I happen to like political speeches, and I happen to think they are an efficient way for politicians to express the complexity of their approach to a public problem.

There’s a lot of critique of politics as entertainment, but if you go back to the nineteenth century, before television and radio, politics was a form of public entertainment. And guess what? When politics was entertainment, we had exceptionally high turnout levels.

We may be at a moment when politics itself is for a minority—but a growing minority of the country—not only a form of public engagement but also a kind of entertainment. Even the rising importance of [Jon] Stewart and [Stephen] Colbert is a positive development because those guys have drawn more people into the political debate. Some studies show that those who claim to get most of their news from Stewart are actually very well informed, which maybe should worry those of us who have hung around the old media all of our lives.

TV personalities such as Stewart and Colbert have an ability to express irony that is pretty powerful, and you don’t get that in a lot of media. You get a lot of straight reporting or angry vindictiveness, but what’s nice about Colbert and Stewart is that they are in certain ways able to communicate something of the ambivalence of the situation...

Would you be able to take us inside the mind of reporters or columnists as they’re thinking about what they do on a day-to-day basis? What are the goals or the purpose that they think of when they’re covering politics?

Well, first of all, traditional journalists and columnists have overlapping but different purposes, and I think there should be some overlap because the opinionated columnist has a job of conveying information as well as opinions, of reporting as well as opining, because opinions completely disconnected from information are problematic. We have a perch that can provide people with a perspective even as we are very open about reporting from a point of view.

Somebody once told me—and I will be saddened to learn from one of *The Hedgehog Review's* smart readers that it's totally apocryphal—but somebody once told me that Hegel said the job of a journalist is to convey information and hide ignorance at the same time. I always identified with that when I was trying to convey what was going on in a given situation to a reader, knowing that I had to operate at a rather high speed. There are always limits to what you actually know. You can try to correct for that as much as possible within the framework of a news cycle. Nonetheless, there are limits to what you can do in eight hours as opposed to a two-year study.

For the reporter in the field, the first questions in their heads, the things they are concerned about, are: did I grasp the most important thing that is going on here and did I convey it accurately? From there you go to: what does this mean in, say, the context of a political campaign or in the context of an argument about a given public policy or some other kind of public debate? I think those are the constant imperatives. And there are moments when journalists take the longer view: am I getting the trajectory of this battle right or wrong, both in terms of who's going to win it and who's going to lose? No matter what anybody says, readers really do care about who's going to win and who's going to lose. They also care about the philosophical and political stakes in a given argument.

My favorite example of this back before I was an opinionated columnist happened when my colleague and a great political reporter Dan Balz and I were covering the New Hampshire primary in 1992. It was after the Jennifer Flowers story, and all our editors in Washington sensed that Clinton's candidacy was going to die from this. We were in New Hampshire, and clearly his candidacy wasn't dying, and Dan and I talked about this for a long time. I've always had the theory that if an editor thinks something, even if you disagree with the editor, the editor's probably reflecting something useful that's going on out there, a perception that a significant number of people may have, and so we ended up writing a story, an analysis that began this way: there are two views of Bill Clinton's prospects, one in Washington and one in New Hampshire, and both of them are probably wrong. (Of course, I'm citing this because it looks good in retrospect. I won't cite things that make me look like a fool.) We suggested Clinton was going to survive in the short run, but this problem over sexuality would probably endure over a longer period and have its costs.

A former editor in the Outlook section of the *Washington Post*, a wonderful editor named Jodie Allen, used to have a *New Yorker* cartoon of somebody going to a fruit stand holding up a piece of fruit and asking, "Just how fresh are these insights?" I always loved that cartoon as a reflection of what you're trying to do as a columnist because as a columnist, you really are taking a side. Most columnists really do care passionately about what's going on and are unapologetic about advancing a set of arguments that are designed to move the political debate in one direction as opposed

to another, but at the same time, you're trying to provide insight on what's going on, an insight that might be useful to those who passionately disagree with you.

There are often two kinds of compliments you get as a columnist. One is from the person who agrees with what you write, and they're glad you're expressing their feelings, but the other, which is sometimes more valuable, is from the person who says, "you know, I really like your column even though I disagree with most of what you write," because they at least see a decent version of the argument they might disagree with or they might learn something from it. Both kinds of praise are nice—better than the alternative—but I think those two forms of praise reflect what you actually are looking to do as a columnist: to be morally engaged in politics and have a political and moral feeling about where the country should move, but at the same time to inform people who might disagree with that view. And you hope also occasionally to be entertaining, funny, ironic.

You have an obligation to analyze the facts on the ground, but also to hang yourself out there a little bit over the edge and actually make some assessments about what might be happening, right?

Right, and sometimes there's the obligation to call your own side to task, either because it's behaving foolishly or because it's not living up to what you think its mission is.

But that must be an incredibly difficult thing. Writing a column several times a week is probably pretty exhausting. It doesn't look that hard from the outside because you're writing around 750 words just a couple of times a week and how hard that can be, but if you think about it, to say something new and interesting a couple of times a week is actually kind of difficult.

Right. You think about it all the time. It's always in the back of your head: what are you going to write next? At least for me, I juggle a combination of the short-term and the long-term. Certain columns I have in my head for the long-term, which I might not get to for a while because events intervene.

You've got them in your mental bullpen.

That's a nice term. I'll remember that. During the campaign, I was talking to Charles Krauthammer about this, and he said he thinks that at this point the only thing people want to read about from political columnists is the campaign. I'm not sure he's 100 percent right about that, but I think he has a point. We are talking here in April of 2008, and there are some things I want to write about that I keep kicking down the road because there's some development in the campaign that strikes me as interesting. It's fun to occasionally just get completely off politics or completely off the track that you're expected to be on to write about something else.

Does that suggest a broader civic mission that you understand yourself to have as a columnist?

Well, if I answered in the affirmative, I'd sound terribly self-important, which

I don't want to do, but I think most people who write columns care passionately about politics and where their community and country are going and so that is a civic act.

I don't think people drawn to this kind of work are drawn to it simply because they like to write, but also because they hope to affect the direction of things. The best example of that is William F. Buckley, Jr., who, through all his work, whether in his column or through the creation of the *National Review* and the process of brokering a philosophical agreement among conservatives, was one of the most consequential people in the last fifty years. Buckley in an odd way is my model, and I joke that if I could be about 3 or 4 percent as effective on behalf of my side's ideas as Buckley was on behalf of his side's, I'd consider that a consequential contribution.

That suggests that there's a distinction between the bare process of politics as electoral politics and the larger character of civic life to which the media have something to contribute in terms of a broader conversation.

Right. One of the conservatives' favorite books is by Richard Weaver called *Ideas Have Consequences*, and they do. In the combination of ideas, movements, popular attitudes, and political power, there's an interesting nexus among all of these, and the columnist, but more generally the person in this broad sort of opinion world, is operating within that nexus.

We've talked about the tension between the obligation to cover events and offer analysis. Where do you think the media are headed?

This is a very troubling time for the old media. I've had, in just the last week, a whole series of conversations with friends in the traditional media, talking about massive buyouts, great people moving out of the media or accepting the buyouts. In the short run, I'm very worried about the future of some of the great media institutions of our country and of the local daily newspaper. This is a very troubling time because no matter how much I like the new media, as I said earlier, I really value the reporting function and think it's extremely important. I'm worried about how we're going to support that. The function is needed, therefore some smart people are eventually going to figure out how to make it pay again in a way that would support a substantial reporting infrastructure. But it's a real crisis right now.

On the other hand, we will continue to see a proliferation of other media forms. My friend Tom Rosenstiel at the Project for Excellence in Journalism likes to say that the web has recreated the Revolutionary War pamphleteering tradition. It is possible for lots of different people to put their views out there, and even if they only reach two hundred or two thousand people, that's a significant amount of power an individual now has in his or her hands. If the view gets popular, if it's emailed around, people have the capacity to create their own audiences.

The old-fashioned journalist in me still wants more of the stuff floating around out there to be rooted in more exploration and reporting. The web has empowered a lot of academics who have deep knowledge about particular problems to share their knowledge well beyond their classrooms or the confines of an academic journal. That's also a great thing. It goes on on the left and on the right, and the academics are as robust in fighting each other as the bloggers are.

So I am hopeful for the long run and worried for the short run—that is the simplest summary. Somehow, I think we will work out creatively how to use these media, how to preserve reporting and the like, but I think we're going to go through a rough patch as we watch the transformation of the older media forms that looked invulnerable for a long time and turned out not to be.

What do you think this does to the way the media cover politics? Do you think there's an effect of this period of turbulence on the covering of politics?

Well, politics is now covered not just by those who are paid by large news organizations to do it. It's also covered by all of these partisan blogs. That the blogs have the capacity to take stories that the mainstream media might've downplayed and re-inject them into the public conversation—on balance, that's a good thing.

If the new media have the capacity to spread information more widely, they also have the capacity to spread untruth more widely. One of the clearest examples is polling that suggests that perhaps 10 percent of Americans think Barack Obama is a Muslim, which he is not. But I think there are many useful things the new media can do to encourage the mainstream media to look again at stories they might have let go.

I think it's fair to say, for example, that *Talking Points Memo* played a major role in pushing the mainstream media to look more into the firing of the U.S. attorneys. They used the capacity of the new media to collect information from around the country, often from their own readers looking at local newspapers to connect the dots between a development in San Diego and a development in St. Paul. That's a very useful function.

The Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, which publishes *The Hedgehog Review*, thinks a lot about culture and larger cultural patterns. Do you pick up any way in which the media's coverage of politics seems to be affected by other large-scale cultural patterns?

Well, I think the media are always swimming in some sea, and that sea is culture, so at any given moment, what is happening in the broader culture affects in subtle but important ways what the media are about. The media had a powerful effect in the way it covered Civil Rights, but the Civil Rights Movement itself had a powerful impact on the media, morally and culturally.

I think the media were slow to understand how important theologically conservative forms of religion were in our country. After first treating these phenomena as if they were as exotic as some ritual from Bali, they finally came to terms with the fact that these movements were an important aspect of our culture—as important as rock and hip hop, sports, literature, and, yes, more liberal forms of religion. These interactions happen all the time, and obviously, the forms that the culture creates affect the nature of the media. A comparable danger now might be a failure to see how certain forms of conservatism, including the religious right, are losing their dominance and are being displaced by something new, a form of progressive politics that draws on the old liberalism but is also different from it in important ways. But we'll see about that.

Do you see any particular dimensions of this that are especially pointed now? Are there ways in which larger cultural patterns are affecting the way the media are covering this political campaign?

Market metaphors became more and more important from the 1970s forward, and they inflect so much of our public conversation and in some ways can distort the public conversation. They can be helpful in certain ways, but not helpful in other ways, so I think that's clearly one very large cultural shift. And I think that trend may have passed its peak.

America will always confront a battle between individualism and communitarianism. Our genius is that we usually manage to correct when we tilt too far in one direction or the other. I think there's a kind of communitarian correction going on now that's not simply ideological because there are a lot of conservative, service-oriented communitarians. In a certain way, John McCain's notion of honor from the military is a more communitarian view than a purely individualistic view. Obama's approach is deeply communitarian. It's "Yes we can," not "Yes, I can." So just as market metaphors became hugely powerful over a long period of time, I think there is a search for new metaphors going on right now.