

POLEMICAL HACKS, BASTARDIZED GONZO,
AND THE DEATH OF DEMOCRACY
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Democracy in the United States is gradually deteriorating. Youth interest in politics is especially telling, as apathy is compounded with a growing detachment from, and cynicism of, democratic and legislative processes. Voter turnout has been steadily declining since the beginning of the twentieth century, such that dialogue and compromise on important issues are now virtually nonexistent. This is a result of a turn toward anomic democracy, as citizen confidence in government deteriorates. Contrary to popular belief, the usual scapegoats—interest groups and negative campaign tactics—are not to blame. Due to the structured nature of interest group interaction, lobbyists can actually be controlled by legislators, and they are useful as indicators of an issue's electoral salience, as well as providers of specialized knowledge. Campaigning, in contrast to its negative portrayal, provides voters with relevant information upon which to base decisions. Media outlets, above all, are responsible for this state of affairs due to their prioritizing of profit over accurate and informative reporting.

The media was originally conceptualized by the Founding Fathers as a forum for ideas to provide citizens with the information necessary to perform their civic responsibilities. It is clear that that this forum has not developed. Political discourse in the news has fallen victim to three developments: the bastardized use of Gonzo journalism as evidenced by the "new pamphleteers"; a shift in media coverage toward the sensational and marketable; and the lack of civic education provided to graduates of communications programs. Feigned objectivity, bias, and uninformed generalizations are considered acceptable, if not desirable, in contemporary political reporting and publishing. Yet the media presents themselves in the opposite manner through the use of slogans such as "FOX: Fair & Balanced," and "NBC News has got you covered." Thus, news organizations imply that they are exclusive arbiters of accurate information, and that they desire, at least on the surface, to provide information as a public service. As Gans points out in a report on the 2004 election, the media has "claimed constitutionally-mandated special access privileges to government information and facilities on the grounds that they are the most likely purveyors of information needed by citizens to perform their civic duties" (264). The public has come

to believe that the media actively fulfills this role, and uncritically accepts news outputs. Media sources have been allowed to position themselves in this manner, without being held accountable for the results. Whether or not the media should be held responsible for shouldering certain public functions may have once been a relevant question, but at this point in time, due to the current state of media-public relations, such an investigation would be fruitless.

Because of media focus on the simple and profitable, citizen perception of, and participation in, government has shifted. Presently, the United States is in the midst of a dangerous type of democracy that might be described by Emile Durkheim's sociological concept of *anomie*, or a state characterized by feelings of purposelessness and the absence of social norms. With respect to democracy, this describes an alienated citizenry, hostile to perceived government ineptitude and unaccountable bureaucracy. In an article in *Political Science Quarterly*, Durrant argues that "a 'democratic deficit' lies at the heart of this nation's disastrous slide into anomic democracy" (25). By "democratic deficit," Durrant means a distorted version of governance that exists when

considerations of policy and program effectiveness get lost in a pell-mell rush to please voters who are simultaneously insisting on the effective delivery of the public goods, services, and opportunities that they continue to cherish. To disappoint those voters by enervating government's capacity to deliver on its responsibilities could be equally hazardous to politicians' careers. (30)

Durrant contrasts "anomic democracy" with "deliberative democracy," his concept of the delicate balance between discussion and dialogue. Discussion, in his definition, involves the subjective framing of issues and the use of persuasive tactics, a component that today overshadows dialogue, that is, the nuanced discourse, compromise, and shared understanding necessary for dealing with complex issues.

To demonstrate that persuasion has overwhelmed dialogue, it is only necessary to look at what passes for political scholarship in publishing. A new breed of commentators has gained precedence, a group Alan Wolfe terms "the new pamphleteers" based on the characteristics their writing shares with the incendiary pamphlets of the colonial era. The acceptance of this style can be directly attributed to the growth of New Journalism, particularly to the development of Gonzo journalism by Dr. Hunter S. Thompson in the 1960s, a method of writing involving extreme subjectivity and personal involvement in the

story in order to give precise impressions of the event and of the personalities of those involved (Othitis 2). Thompson differs, however, in that he acknowledges subjectivity, and, in addition, is entirely without political affiliation, preferring to write what he has personally experienced. The new pamphleteers, in contrast, adopt and then misuse the free-flowing style by portraying their own subjective opinions as objective truth, and dismissing counterarguments with cliché-ridden personal attacks on their opponents. From this the public is given commentary that describes Bush as having a “middle-finger foreign policy,” casts liberals as terrorist appeasers, and features foreign affairs reports from individuals who have never left the country (Wolfe 12). These attitudes leave the public increasingly misinformed about, and alienated from, political processes. These conditions, as factors in Durrant’s conception of anomic democracy, contribute to the development of widespread perceptions that characterize government as “incompetent, unresponsive, out of control, and above the law” (25).

Empirical evidence, in the form of voter turnout and election surveys, confirms the growing disinterest in politics. While voter turnout is not necessarily an indicator of citizens’ participation in civic affairs, the dereliction of what is a relatively simple aspect of civic engagement raises the question as to how committed citizens are to democracy in the United States. In 1964, voter turnout began a steady decline, and after 1972 it has not risen above 60% (Winders 836). Even in the highly divisive 2004 elections, turnout was estimated at only 59%, a number that does not stand out with respect to historic levels (Gans 12). Polls conducted by the 1994 National Election Study (NES) indicate that a majority of voters of all ages did not trust the government to do the right thing, thought that a sizable number of individuals in government were corrupt, said they had no say in national government, and agreed that national politicians did not care what they thought (Bennett 47).

Even more disturbing are the attitudes expressed by young adults, those individuals who will soon be called upon to fill prominent positions in public life, and to maintain and strengthen the political system in the United States. An indicator studied by NES (individuals under twenty years old), and also by UCLA (surveys of incoming freshman), is the degree to which young people engage in political conversations. NES found that only 6% of those surveyed spoke of politics everyday, and 67% said they almost never did. Only 15% of UCLA respondents reported frequent political conversations, an all-time low in thirty years of surveying (Bennett 48). Although it is noted that throughout the twentieth century

younger people have consistently been less interested in government affairs, there is a profound difference between the present and earlier time periods. In the past, although unengaged, the young people surveyed were more idealistic about public institutions than their elders. Today, "the facts are clear and compelling: today's youth express overwhelmingly cynical views about government and political leaders, and they cite their cynicism as a reason for indifference to and disengagement from politics" (Bennett 50).

Yet the political process has unseen and surprising strengths in lobbyists and negative campaigning. In the NES study mentioned previously, researchers also found that about 80% of all those surveyed thought that "Washington was run to benefit just 'a few special interests looking out for themselves'" (Bennett 47), a clear indication that citizens think politicians are beholden to lobbyists paid by interest groups, and out of touch with their constituents. The reality, however, is that lobbyists and interest groups play a positive role in the political process because of the way in which their relationships with legislators are structured. First of all, due to their expertise and access to private information, lobbyists are useful to legislators in areas where first-hand experience and knowledge are unobtainable. Former Senator Charles Percy stated that lobbyists "[perform] extremely useful functions in the national interest. They can be tapped for expert information on problems, they can analyze the impact of proposed legislation in their areas of concern" (Ainsworth 44).

Lobbyists are useful even when they are actively misrepresenting themselves. Contrary to what one might think, this is beneficial to the political process, as legislators are well aware that lobbyists have an incentive to overstate their support. Ainsworth cites an example whereby Coca-Cola and Hershey funded lobbying for the American Bottlers of Carbonated Beverages in order to claim that the effort had the backing of 12,000 manufacturers, despite the fact that the two major companies covertly sponsored the entire campaign. Knowing situations like this occur, legislators then demand a higher quality of evidence that the issues put forward by lobbyists are of electoral salience. And lobbyists realize that the degree to which they have access and influence in the future depends on their reputation for honesty. A lobbyist who provides a legislator with misleading information, and thus angers constituents or endangers the lawmaker's reelection, is not going to be trusted on future issues. Thus, interaction between legislators and lobbyists becomes structured so that the electoral salience of an issue is indicated by the actions the lobbyist

takes. Actions that require high costs and demonstrate integrity cement credibility with legislators. Examples of these actions include: flying high-ranking executives to legislative offices to spend their valuable time speaking with legislators, orchestrating extensive mail campaigns that generate large responses from group members, providing legislators with research that is time consuming and costly to produce, and attending committee hearings to show interest and concern with the outcome (Ainsworth 52). Legislators are thus able to access the expertise of lobbyists and gauge the electoral support behind an issue, while simultaneously regulating the influence such interests have in the political process. It is important to note that while not all citizens are represented by interest groups, the voting population ultimately decides on whether or not the legislator continues in office, and thus has an effect on what interest groups are deemed acceptable to collaborate with. Regardless of the amount of funding or connections an interest group has, a legislator cannot ignore the effects that working with particular groups will have on constituents.

Like lobbying, campaigning, specifically negative campaigning, is regarded as detrimental to democracy, and also has an impact on politicians' careers, which depend heavily on the portrayal of themselves and opponents during the election season. Here a distinction must be made between types of campaigning. Positive campaigning is the type of appeal linked to a "clean" campaign, emphasizing the candidate's own strengths. Its opposite is the negative campaign, which seeks to point out flaws and failings of the opposition. Positive and negative campaigning can be assumed to have the same degree of fact and integrity, differing only in perspective. Most individuals prefer candidates to speak of their own qualifications instead of pointing out the flaws in their opponent. When examined further, however, it is clear that both types have the same effect: "It's considered wrong to call your opponent 'un-Christian,' but acceptable to call yourself 'the Christian candidate in this election'" (Mayer 455). Such a viewpoint ignores the benefits of negative campaigning. The need for new proposals "becomes clear only when a candidate puts them in the context of present problems—only, that is to say, when a candidate 'goes negative'" (Mayer 441). It is doubtful that any candidate would voluntarily admit to proposing bad policy. Negative campaigning keeps candidates honest, for if the opposition never pointed out inaccuracies, candidates could make any statement at all, no matter how inaccurate, false, or unrealistic, without fear of reprisal.

Character, another aspect of campaigning typically associated with negative imagery, can, as with negative appeals, bring about positive and informative results. Candidate behavior can be more relevant to a campaign than policy when one considers the number of initiatives carried out that were never raised during the campaign. In addition, a politician's word is not law. Proposals must go through a complex bureaucracy before they are implemented. For this reason, candidates must be "good managers and political strategists, meet frequently with other elected officials, lead public opinion, persuade the recalcitrant, and attract and retain talented staff. And all of these are matters of ability, temperament, and character" (Mayer 445). In fact, polls show that voters are highly concerned with personal qualities, for good reason. Thus campaigning, when done honestly, serves to inform voters, not detract from the political process, by providing information that would otherwise not come to light. Today, in spite of the consistently negative view emanating from the news, and the all-time-low approval ratings of government, empirical evidence indicates that most candidates do keep their campaign pledges, as it is electorally sound to do so (Patterson 19).

As a political information source, however, the media has failed, and exerts an anomie effect on democracy. Reporters are unable to accurately inform the public of policy consequences (as they themselves have no specialized knowledge in the area on which to gauge outcomes), analyze events for historical patterns and context (lacking knowledge, they treat events as isolated occurrences), or explain how political facts and stances vary based on certain conditions (instead waiting to pounce on candidates who change opinions, not recognizing the compromise inherent in the political process) (Graber 265, Roberts and Eksterowicz 67). Having achieved commercial success with the present format, media outlets are loath to offer lengthy, complex, and serious discussions of politics. Case studies and panel interviews treat events as discrete points within short time frames (an election cycle, a politician's term, the fiscal year), and avoid long-term analysis based on a continuum of events and policy. Not only is the press uninformative, it is also unresponsive, maintaining no contact with any form of public opinion. Polls indicate that audiences overwhelmingly have a "dislike of hype, sensationalism, and faulty news judgments" (Graber 268). Yet because of the consolidation in ownership and the homogenization of content, the press offers no alternative to its restrictive framing of public discourse.

The cause behind the abundance of persuasion and the lack of public discourse in society is the development of attitudes in the media that are excessively cynical towards

politics. This came about due to a shift in journalism in the 1960s. The shortcomings of government and politicians at the time spurred a change in reporting, as journalists began to cover news critically, no longer taking official statements at face value. This approach served the public interest, and “into the early 1970s, this new attitude was tempered by a prudent regard for the facts. The press hounded Johnson and Nixon on Vietnam and Watergate, but only as credible allegations and damning evidence came increasingly to light” (Patterson 18). Realizing that negative news sells, however, journalism ceased to be reporting, and became attack journalism, “rooted in controversy and superficial condemnation” (Patterson 18).

Around the same time, Dr. Hunter S. Thompson roared through the Nevada desert, heading towards Las Vegas; a man on a mission, he set about consuming copious quantities of mind-altering substances, all the while tearing down established journalistic conventions in his journey to document the heart of the American dream. Thompson explains:

I don't get any satisfaction from out of the old traditional journalist's view—"I just covered the story. I just gave it a balanced view." Objective journalism is one of the main reasons American politics has been allowed to be so corrupt for so long. You can't be objective about Nixon. How can you be objective about Clinton? ("Gonzo Journalism")

Thompson would survive the bad vibrations of Vegas to publish *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream*, and to continue the development of Gonzo journalism, which by his own account requires “the talent of a master journalist, the eye of an artist, and the heavy balls of an actor” (Othitis 2). It is recognizable not only by violence, drugs, guns, and subject matter far removed from the original story, but by Thompson's realization that “one could learn just as much about a place by interviewing its drunks and addicts as one would be talking to high standing citizens” (Othitis 9). The outrageous and nearly unbelievable accounts quickly found an audience, and, with a little luck, the standards of acceptable journalism were ruined forever. The new pamphleteers have attempted to capitalize on this shift, but they are clearly not cut from the same cloth as Thompson, as they are simply slaves to ideology, nursing a desperate hope that they will find a receptive audience to agree with their published claims of objectivity in which “logic, evidence, and reason are conspicuously absent” (Wolfe 12).

Thompson, however, was no precursor to the pamphleteer. First of all, he has never feigned objectivity as the pamphleteers do, he has never portrayed his opinions as

researched fact, and he does not compromise his personal opinions for ideology. Even when traveling with and supporting George McGovern's presidential campaign he attacked aspects of McGovern's campaigning which he found distasteful (Othitis 1). Furthermore, his coverage of news is not from a journalist's perspective, but from Hunter S. Thompson's perspective, covering the story only when it happens to intersect with his own activities. And although he claimed that "four more years of George Bush will be like four more years of syphilis," and endorsed John Kerry as a "good man with a brave heart," it was not out of ideological conviction, but because of his personal involvement. Here, Thompson explains his history with, and affinity for, Kerry:

I had a quick little rendezvous with [John Kerry] on a rain-soaked runway in Aspen, Colorado . . . we reminisced about trying to end the Vietnam War in 1972. That was the year I first met him, at a riot on that elegant little street in front of the White House. He was yelling into a bullhorn and I was trying to throw a dead, bleeding rat over a black-spike fence and onto the president's lawn. ("Fear and Loathing, Campaign 2004")

The new pamphleteers fail to engage their subject matter in the same way, assuming that their own subjectivity is warranted and acceptable to claim as fact, not recognizing that Thompson does not write stories, he lives them, getting as close to his subject matter as possible. When researching for *Hell's Angels*, a book on the motorcycle gang of the same name, he did not adopt the academic strategy, but purchased a motorcycle and rode with them until a disagreement ended his run with a stomping. He seeks the heart of the matter as a service to all those who want to know, avoiding the pathetic pandering of the pamphleteers, in which "conservatives tend to read and recommend conservative books and liberals, liberals' books" (Wolfe 12).

And young people and music lovers are not immune either from this poorly manufactured web of pseudo-facts and pop-polisci. Creators of the "Rock Against Bush CD" did not produce it to spur discourse, or even to endorse another candidate's policies. Its sole purpose was to remove Bush from office, a viewpoint easy to get behind when the liner notes "provide 60 'reasons to hate Bush Jr.'" (Walker 28). This is hardly the type of intellectual exchange called for in a deliberative democracy, as these sub-par analyses only justify predetermined ideological conclusions. Durrant confirms this point, and explains the

process of public alienation, in a discussion of manufactured truths that develop due to the vacuum left as public-funded research diminished in scope:

Sponsored studies with their findings reflecting their sponsor's agendas are facilely reported as objective science to unwary consumers. In the process, factoids get confused with facts, "affect" (or emotion) drives out "intellect" in evaluating news, and a confused public paradoxically presses further demands for redress upon a federal government it perceives as ineffectual. (28)

Survey results by the NES presented in the introductory section demonstrate these declining levels of participation and trust in government. Citizens are simultaneously distancing themselves from government and criticizing the distance between themselves and government.

If the new pamphleteers can be accounted for by the misappropriation of Gonzo journalism, why are traditional news outlets also inept at covering politics? In addition to a shift in journalism style, there has been a shift in journalism education. Prior to World War II there were few undergraduate programs in journalism or communications. Reporters often had degrees in subjects within the humanities and social sciences. With the expansion of higher education, and the push from employers to have potential hires already versed in the writing and production of stories, came entire programs based on the collecting and delivering of news (Roberts and Eksterowicz 67). The problem with this approach is that as media markets become larger, stations are more apt to have specialized areas of reporting. According to Roberts and Eksterowicz, "despite the growing trend towards specialization in local broadcasting, few communication programs require majors to specialize in substantive areas" (69). An analysis of some of the top communications degrees in the United States reveals that "students can graduate from many of these programs without taking courses designed to provide them with a working knowledge of substantive areas of government, economics, political science, political behavior, and public policy" (70). This is discomforting given that journalists need to be able to distinguish between informed and uninformed experts in policy areas, especially in a paradigm where they are expected to critically examine social problems and formulate solutions.

This is a pressing concern, but there is a deeper institutional rot at work that will not be solved with a mere change in course requirements. According to Graber, it is surprising that media outlets have performed any public services as well as they have, given that the

press “has slighted significant functions that the Founding Fathers and their spiritual heirs assumed it could and would perform” (258). In their complete form, these functions are: existing as a forum and marketplace of ideas, providing citizens with information necessary to perform their civic responsibilities, serving as the public’s agent in communicating with government, providing an outlet for public expression of minority views, and acting as the public’s agent in monitoring government misconduct. In order to truly be a marketplace of ideas, media must come from a diverse set of sources, and must be prepared by a diverse group of people in order to provide citizens with the ability to access a multitude of ideas. This is not the case, unfortunately, as print and electronic media are becoming concentrated further, resulting in a homogenization of news content. The ten largest newspaper chains control over one-third of the market, eighty-five percent of the television audience in the United States is exposed to programs created by three major networks, and the news magazine business is controlled by three publications. Ninety-nine percent of the news sources in the United States with daily publication schedules are served by either the Associated Press or United Press International wire services (Graber 260). Such a concentration keeps smaller outlets, and dissenting voices, out of the market because they cannot attract the advertising revenue necessary to expand their operations, advertising revenue that flows freely to the large, national conglomerates.

Even a press corps focused on negative coverage and scandal avoids actively monitoring government, declining to systematically examine political affairs. According to Graber, “newspeople have pushed ahead with stories only under two conditions: when the factual situation was relatively clear so that extensive probing, costly in time, effort, and loss of valuable news sources, was unnecessary; and when the story promised to be enthralling to media audiences” (270). For instance, the press actually played a smaller role in Watergate than credited for:

[W]ith few exceptions, it did not really put its muscle behind the investigation of executive branch misdeeds until the presidential campaign was nearly over. Only when the story could no longer be disparaged as normal election propaganda, but could be featured as an issue of pervasive corruption and dishonesty at the highest levels of government, did the media pick it up en masse. (Graber 271).

Once again the public's need to know has fallen victim to commercial success, emphasizing quick results, sensationalism, and a lack of investigation. The end result is a new mindset among citizens that calls for an injection of common sense into democracy by putting aside expertise and politicians in favor of direct rule. The problem with this view is that it is held by a "disgruntled and largely amorphous citizenry" that does not recognize the complexity of politics because of the simplified context in which issues are now presented (Durrant 27).

The current situation in California vividly exemplifies how warped public policy becomes when disaffected citizens circumvent political parties, legislators, and lobbyists. Originally conceived to remove moneyed interests from politics, the referendum process in California has actually spawned an entire industry based on collecting signatures for petitions and mounting expensive, multi-faceted public relations campaigns. "In California, in 1996 alone, more than \$141 million was spent on initiatives, which was 33 percent more than was spent by the much-maligned candidates for the state legislature" (Zakaria 196). The net result of unencumbered access is a gaggle of propositions lacking bipartisan support, with policy more inclined towards creating mutual hostility than a utopian participatory democracy.

The large number of propositions passed have created more problems than they have solved, as the referendums have overtaken the budgeting process. "Today 85 percent of the California state budget is outside of the legislature's or the governor's control. . . . The vast majority of the state's budget is 'pre-assigned.' In California today real power resides nowhere" (Zakaria 193). This is because legislators have been given the responsibility to implement a plethora of new policies, but they have not been given the power to allocate funds effectively or shift resources to respond to changing situations. What follows in this situation is the removal of expert oversight in policy areas, and the development of referendums that simultaneously require officials "to cut taxes and yet improve services" (Zakaria 194). In addition, accountability to the public is lost, as legislators no longer have direct control of the state's finances. Voters are left with little basis upon which to judge their representatives, as it is becoming impossible to tell if funding problems are due to issues at the local level, the legislative level, or at the referendum level, which leads to further dissatisfaction with the political process. According to Zakaria, "California's state government and its legislature have among the lowest public-approval ratings among

American states" (195). This in a state widely regarded as one of the best run in the nation during the 1950s and 60s.

Although the referendum process is obviously flawed, civic discourse is not a lost cause, provided a real method of informing the public can be utilized. A study done in Great Britain—mirroring similar studies conducted by the Kettering Foundation's National Issues Forums in the United States—on deliberative democracy confirmed that citizens were initially too uninformed to understand policy, but with proper technical support and expertise they could become engaged in crafting bipartisan solutions. A cross-sample of the British electorate was provided with facts on crime, along with appropriate experts to provide interpretation, and was given three days to discuss and formulate viewpoints. Researchers found that they engaged with and struggled over the issues, and that in the end their opinions did shift. The interesting part of this is that researchers noted it was "not that people changed their minds from very set positions, as much as that those original positions were not that deeply held. . . . Much of the process was their coming to grips with the issues" (Durrant 43). It is not that people are disinterested, or that moneyed lobbyists control legislators, or that political campaigns mislead voters and drive them away. People are interested and can be educated to make good decisions, lobbyists and interests groups provide specialized knowledge and strive for responsibility in placing issues on the agenda, and campaigning, positive and negative, serves voters in laying bare a candidate's legislative qualifications and character. The problem is that citizens are misinformed in their daily lives by the media, and subsequently become disenchanted with and alienated from the political process.

How did it come to pass that the media, an institution which claims to provide the primary forum for civic discourse, has become the reason that such a dialogue has failed to materialize? The answer is that the media is not a single institution, and in fact has no formal arrangements to ensure that any part of its mythical mandate from the Founding Fathers is completed. Nor was the media designed to carry out any specific functions that it now claims as its own. Instead, the present state of media is due to sporadic, market-directed development, and only haphazardly provides public services. Graber states plainly that, "the media developed in this manner primarily because most were organized as self-sustaining private enterprises dependent for survival on earning sufficient money to pay for the costs of the enterprise" (272). Advertising became highly valued, and the sensational

sound bites of generalist reporters and the new pamphleteers were found to sell better than policy analysis. And the public, in abandoning discourse, has the idea that change should be immediate and simple, and the press is complicit in promoting this idea, by “[extolling] immediate results and unbending leadership,” not recognizing that “these are rare and typically problematic in a political system based on an elaborate system of checks and balances that is designed to foster compromise and deliberation” (Patterson 18).

Thus the problem with public discourse today is with the core structure of the media, which serves as a barrier to dialogue, simultaneously failing to properly inform the citizenry, and barring access to anyone else who may try. Only a strong commitment to institutional reforms within press-rooms and journalism programs can provide the forum for the informed civic discourse called for by Durrant. And perhaps what is needed to start the process is another scathing critique by a maverick journalist whose only goal is to live the story. For Gonzo journalism is not the problem, but the ultimate solution, an idea that each citizen should engage directly in political life, not merely read about it. And in today’s sordid state of affairs, Dr. Hunter S. Thompson may be the only one capable of orchestrating such a spectacular reversal of journalism’s decline. And despite his untimely death, perhaps, as Thompson once eulogized an old friend, “it might even come to pass that he will suddenly appear . . . on some moonless night when the peacocks are screeching with lust. . . . Maybe so, and that is one ghost who will always be welcome . . . even with a head full of acid” (*The Great Shark Hunt* 515).

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COMMENTARY

Ryan Gogol

It can certainly be argued that American democracy is faltering in some very important respects. Simply consider any one of the following issues: low voter turnout, growing disinterest in politics among youth, biased reporting and misleading information, a

growing distrust of the national government. According to Eric Kaufmann, all of these problems point to a severe absence of informed political discourse among the public, and it is the media “above all” that ought to be blamed. Likewise, he concludes in his essay that *only* “a strong commitment to institutional reforms within press rooms and journalism programs can provide the forum for the informed civic discourse” that democracy needs.

However, I would highly caution that while the media reforms Kaufmann proposes might indeed be a step in the right direction, they are anything but a panacea. In order to rectify the anomie of American democracy, these would have to be aided by other important, and perhaps more basic, developments. These include louder calls for changes in government and corporate accountability, and also more frequent public use of more decentralized news sources, namely, the Internet.

In the first place, it is not entirely clear that the media have, for example, been the main culprits behind youth “cynicism of [and growing detachment from] democratic and legislative processes.” A lot of the data cited for this claim involves voter statistics, especially among young adults. Here, Kaufmann is right to acknowledge that voting is not the only meaningful form of political participation, nor is it perceived by many people to be the most effective, as there are a host of other ways to get involved. But Kaufmann poses the question, if voting is such a simple process, why, then, does the number of young voters continue to dwindle? I would agree with him in maintaining that many voters, young adults especially, need to be better educated on the issues and government policies on which they are voting when they choose a candidate. But I do not see why these statistics show the refrain from voting to be the effect of certain media practices having turned young voters off from politics. Kauffman goes on to suggest that the rise of the so-called “New Pamphleteers” has rendered young people vulnerable to a “poorly manufactured web of pseudo-facts and pop-polisci.” No one will deny that universities and colleges nationwide, including Rutgers, have their fair share of sandbox liberals—idealistic students swayed by such a desire for change that they are more prone to ideological doctrine than to thinking for themselves and doing their own research. Again, it is not clear that this is just a media problem, or that the new pamphleteers should even qualify as real news—it may be unfair to lump them under the broad category of “media outlets.” Lastly, I find it rather interesting that Kaufmann also cites “anomic democracy” as both a political and sociological phenomenon prevalent among young adults today. The associated feelings of

purposelessness and isolation have far less to do with the media *per se*, and a lot more to do with a marked decline in the presence of community and shared sense of ethics in American life.

Kaufmann also fails to mention the significant ways in which the media do promote informed political discourse—the kind of discourse we need to revamp our ailing democracy. Despite the lack of objectivity or integrity that we find in Gonzo journalism, the new pamphleteers or broadcast media, there are still evidently high standards in journalism. All one has to do is open up an issue of such reputed magazines as *The Economist* or *Newsweek* for quality information on a host of political and economic issues. All publications have their biases, but the point is that there is a litany of scholarly publications and journals circulated in America that provide accurate and detailed information on current national and world issues.

Even where standards are not as clearly set, as on the Internet, one can locate anything from the writings of the new pamphleteers, to chat room debates, to political blogs. While there is more risk involved as to the accuracy of information posted, the Internet provides a fast and convenient medium for public discourse that be can accessed from virtually anywhere in the world. Use and consumption of information on the Internet, as well as for any other form of media, falls under the old adage, “buyer beware”—although many of the “facts” and ideas one finds are essentially free. There is no such thing as equal quality of information in journalism, on the Internet, or anywhere else for that matter. As people become more Internet-savvy, and become more concerned in general about the information they consume, they will turn to those news sources of information in the media that satisfy their demands. Furthermore, I would briefly add that there appears to be a certain tension between Kaufmann’s criticism of broadcast media as too sensationalist and his emphasis on the benefits of negative campaigning. It seems that the latter benefits almost entirely from the former.

There are indeed certain aspects of the media that could most definitely use some serious reform. One of the best, and often most cited, suggestions, which Kaufmann makes himself, is to make broadcast media more competitive, because currently, consumers are left to choose among three massive networks that are said to own all of the news programs in the US. It is not as if it is so easy to shut the news off either, when we find it everywhere—on the radio, on televisions in public areas, etc. But this change is not likely to occur until there

is a more pressing cry from the public for the national government to apply some antitrust or other legislation to control the capitalistic excesses of the media market. In fact, I would submit that the “anomie of democracy” that Kaufmann stresses is inseparable from those forces of material excess and ceaseless drive for money, power and ratings that endanger American democracy. Another area of reform that Kaufmann cites is the need for higher standards in graduate journalistic education, and the idea that journalists ought to be educated in the principles and practices of political discourse seems highly reasonable.

But one other area of improvement that Kaufmann could have emphasized is the greater need for more government and corporate accountability, as it is closely tied in with the media industry. The alienation that people feel from their national government is not wholly or primarily due to media sensationalism, yet rather to politicians who are far more closely aligned with elite money and interests. One does not need the media to ultimately reach this conclusion. All one has to do is take a good look at growing inequality in American and a middle-class that is strapped with most of the burden of a widening national deficit. The media may make people biased, but these are the facts. A call for media reform will naturally involve a call for serious economic and social reform as well.

RESPONSE

Eric Kaufmann

Ryan Gogol correctly grasps the implications of reexamining democracy in the United States, and, in the final analysis, we agree on what will have to occur: media reform, and improved government and corporate accountability. Unlike Gogol, however, I do not find that media reform requires, or would be aided by, changes in government and non-media corporate accountability. On the contrary, media reform, specifically with respect to journalistic education, and to reactionary and sensational coverage, must come first. Reform within government and corporations can be affected by those who ultimately control those institutions, that is, voters and employees. In order to do so, accurate information and analysis is necessary. This can only be provided by a reformed, and yes, decentralized media committed to creating a context for dialogue on political and non-political issues alike. As for Gogol’s claim that the media does promote informed political discourse, scholarly magazines and journals such as *The Economist* or *Foreign Affairs* are not likely to be found

in one's local dentist office or hair salon. I will let the events surrounding *Newsweek* this May speak for themselves.

Secondly, I question Gogol's argument regarding the decline in community and shared ethics. I find that the history of the United States has exhibited anything but a shared sense of community and ethics: the Native American genocide commencing with the start of colonialism and pushing westward, the three-fifths compromise in 1787, civil war from 1861-1865, slavery until the 13th Amendment in 1865, women denied suffrage until the 19th Amendment in 1920, Jim Crow laws and their progenies failing to be officially addressed until the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the legality of marital rape until 1993 (some exemptions still exist in thirty-three states). The "community" pointed to in the history of the United States is the experience of a miniscule subset of society, mainly that of white, middle- and upper-class men of proper political and religious persuasion.

However, if one wishes to posit that some generalized community exists and is now in decline, I must also argue against such a conclusion as preemptive. Let me first clarify that when I speak of community in my research, I was interested particularly in political community, thus recognizing that social community does not exist en masse. Robert Putnam, author of "Bowling Alone," one of the most prominent voices regarding the decline of community life cites five main areas as evidence for a shift in citizen engagement. These are religious attendance, labor unions, parent-teacher associations, civic and fraternal organizations, and bowling leagues (69-70). Read those again. What do they have in common? They are indicative of a certain subset of social experiences mentioned earlier. More importantly though, they are all vestiges of a past age and are no longer likely to arrest the concern of young adults or their elder counterparts. In contemporary society, communities are small, individualized, decentralized, and their intricacies not easily identified or understood. Sociological case studies can provide insight into specific circumstances surrounding individualized group experiences which can then be generalized to some degree, but the vast social community Putnam longs for simply does not exist.

My final thoughts and some clarification of my original thesis: The United States has never contained a coherently and commonly held view of community or ethics, but there has been a degree of integration through political institutions and practices such as voting. At this point in time, due to stylistic and institutional changes in the media, individuals have become alienated from political participation, the last remaining link to each other and to

democratic government. Media reform is necessary to reinvigorate civic dialogue, to bring individuals back to a communal world, to encourage employees to question their employers, and to once again make concerned and empathetic citizens into voters, activists, and political participants.

WORK CITED

Putnam, R. D. "Bowling Alone: American's Declining Social Capital." *Journal of Democracy* 6.1 (1995): 65-78.