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Media Logic and Political Communication

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At a recent conference in Milan on news coverage of crime, I witnessed a most extraordinary event: Journalists from major newspapers and television stations were discussing research with professors who conducted the study. When I mentioned to my Italian colleagues that U.S. journalists were seldom receptive to critiques and frank discussions with researchers, they noted that journalists value intellectuals and ideas, even if they do not always follow the advice. I was struck by how different the U.S. news culture is as I reflected on a host of research reports indicating that news organizations in various European countries often invite intellectuals to comment at length on important issues. I suggest that this difference is partially accounted for by journalistic culture within the context of a capitalist and entertainment oriented news media. The following modest comments reflect a substantial literature that traces how mass media and popular cultural content and social forms influence journalism culture and political communication. These considerations may be useful in assisting Rodney Benson's project to more faithfully integrate an extant "media sociology" with the study of political communication.

Peter Berger gave us a sociological gem when he noted that the most important thing you can know about someone is what he or she takes for granted. Because thinking and sense making are reflexive, culturally oriented mass communication researchers are interested in the world views or taken for granted reality of journalists, sources, and audiences. In the United States, political communication is a feature of mass media and popular culture. Actors, journalists, sources, and audiences share common perspectives and take for granted numerous media inspired assumptions. This includes the wide range of meanings about what constitutes political communication. It is no longer clear what the boundaries of political discourse are when presidents and actors switch roles yet play the same character. Audiences, who learn about international politics from movies featuring journalists playing themselves, might be excused if they are oriented to propaganda-inspired clichés that they hear in news reports, on talk shows, and in action adventures. Philo Wasburn agrees with a host of social scientists who study mass communication and the social construction of news, suggesting that when it comes to international news, "when we talk about them, we simultaneously talk about ourselves" (Wasburn, 2002, p. 42).

Media sociology has shown very clearly that news and politics are immersed in the entertainment format. Research also demonstrates that this emphasis has changed the organization as well as the working assumptions and culture of journalists and audiences.

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It is commonplace that the entertainment format dominates popular culture and news in the United States. This is certainly true of the electronic media, but it also applies to print media. Audiences have acquired this perspective from decades of popular culture socialization and now expect it. The "infotainment" news perspective holds that, for practical reasons, any event can be summarily covered and presented as a narrative account with a beginning, middle, and end. This orientation is quite useful given the time pressure to cover an event, especially a complex one involving various facets and numerous possible interpretations. Moreover, as audiences spend more time with these formats, the logic of advertising, entertainment, and popular culture becomes taken for granted as a "normal form" of communication. Thus, various audiences now find it perfectly sensible to "cover the world in 60 seconds," to watch the war "live," or to see major social events cast as music videos. Recall that a large number of people regarded *America's Most Wanted* as a news broadcast.

Two concepts that are helpful in clarifying some important changes that have occurred between news and politics are media logic and entertainment formats. Media logic refers to the assumptions and processes for constructing messages within a particular medium. This includes rhythm, grammar, and format. Format, while a feature of media logic, is singularly important because it refers to the rules or "codes" for defining, selecting, organizing, presenting, and recognizing information as one thing rather than another (e.g., "the evening news" and not a "situation comedy," or a "parody of news"). This logic—or the rationale, emphasis, and orientation promoted by media production, processes, and messages—tends to be evocative, encapsulated, highly thematic, familiar to audiences, and easy to use. Media culture is produced by the widespread application of media logic. Specifically, when media logic is employed to present and interpret institutional phenomena, the form and content of those institutions are altered. Studies document how sports, religion, news, and politics have changed to accommodate this logic.

Media logic has transformed journalistic culture. For example, the way in which journalists conduct interviews has changed, and this in turn has had drastic consequences for political communication. In general, journalistic interviewing—especially among TV reporters—has changed from what was primarily a "discovering" or "information-gathering" enterprise into an aspect of entertainment. As journalistic practices and perspectives as well as entertainment formats became more widely understood, the line separating journalists from their interviewees began to fade.

It is now very common for journalists (or their "advance teams") to set up interviews to complement their own messages and emphases. Far more is involved than simply being used by a news source; the criteria for newsworthy stories, especially among TV journalists, are now used by newsmakers as well. As journalists and sources shared the media logic and formats for what was a good story and a good interview, the occupational and perspective lines that had separated them became blurred (see several works by Richard Ericson and his colleagues) (Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1991). News sources incorporated media logic (e.g., visual and action dimensions) into their planning and promotions for news coverage and soon mastered the logic for "getting airtime." They simply provided the kinds of events that journalistic formats preferred, including the interview scenarios massaging content to suit. President Reagan's advisor, Michael Deaver, was one of the best at this. This new form of journalism has been referred to as "post-journalism" in other work (Altheide & Snow, 1991). Emphasizing entertainment formulas of visual, dramatic action meant that a straight interview providing referential information would take too long and would violate the media logic canon. With the rise of this

postjournalism era, the interview became a tool for quick answers, narratively induced emotion, and a purpose other than obtaining detailed specifics about particular questions.

The postjournalism turn fundamentally challenged the autonomy and relevance of professional journalism's training, ethics, and truth claims. This new form has had consequences for the content of political communication. More is involved than merely setting the agenda; the format and logic of newsworthy information shape the nature of discourse itself. A network producer explained to me why the major U.S. news programs did not discuss the lies and deceptions prior to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, particularly the decisive role played by the Project for the New American Century. The administration, he said, was telling the press about logistics and strategy: "We all knew that the war was going to happen a year before it did, the "rock was rolling downhill," and that it was inevitable" (interview notes; my paraphrase). Such political communication did not grow out of an independent journalism profession but, rather, reflects the growing network of media culture promoting products, information, and cultural consensus. The interaction and shared meanings of news workers who follow the entertainment format and audience members who "experience" the world through these mass media lenses promote "sufficient communication" to achieve the news organization's goals of grabbing the audience while also enabling audience members to be "informed" enough to exchange views with peers.

Political culture and political communication are joined through entertaining news formats. Considering the role of culture in shaping political communication may lead researchers to clarify how message content is reflexive of journalistic practices. Political culture is also affected by these expanding evocative formats as journalists and news sources now routinely package events for media attention, including visuals, urgency, language, and drama, that will appeal to audiences cast in various ways as "patriots," "victims," "beneficiaries," and so forth. For example, research suggests that corporate media seek to harvest audiences by promoting fear as entertainment throughout popular culture and news (Altheide. 2002). This is also happening in Italy, England, and several other European countries. Moreover, such emphasis cultivates audiences to support political campaigns and domestic policies on crime and control as well as foreign interventions. This has led to an immense simplification of politics and world events, often cast as a visual signature of complex events (e.g., staging a "spontaneous" civilian dismantling of a statue of Saddam Hussein; a president landing on an aircraft carrier).

The nature and impact of such media logic on political communication and social order, including international relations, are of utmost importance. Understanding and critiquing political communication has implications for journalists. Students of the mass media can help by identifying the major sources of distortion and offering solutions to news organizations, including suggestions to amend the current working culture. Hopefully, researchers will continue the long tradition of carefully studying all aspects of the news process, including ethnographic studies of news workers and organizational cultures as well as careful qualitative assessments of news materials. Improving political communication by news organizations also requires that U.S. journalists, like their colleagues in Milan, show a willingness to reflect on their practices and products. This would be an important step in the evolution of media culture.

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