

Soft News and Foreign Policy: How Expanding the Audience Changes the Policies

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Abstract

Since the 1980s, the mass media have changed the way they cover major political stories, like foreign policy crises. As a consequence, what the public learns about these events has changed. More media outlets cover major events than in the past, including the entertainment-oriented soft news media. When they do cover a political story, soft news outlets focus more on “human drama” than traditional news media – especially the character and motivations of decision-makers, as well as individual stories of heroism or tragedy – and less on the political or strategic context, or substantive nuances, of policy debates. Many Americans who previously ignored most political news now attend to some information about major political events, like wars, via the soft news media. These changes have important implications for democratic politics. Most importantly, a large number of particularly persuadable potential voters are now tuning in to politics via soft news outlets. This gives politicians an incentive to develop strategies for reaching out to them. Such individuals care less about the nuances of policy and more about the personality of leaders and any sensational human drama that a policy, like a war, entails. Soft news consumers care less about geopolitics than about body bags. Politicians who want their votes are therefore likely to emphasize body bags more than geopolitics. In short, the “new” media environment changes both the style and substance of politics in democracies.

‘I’m the hardest working man in showbiz politics.’

Al Franken

(Comedian, radio talk show host, and
2008 candidate for US Senate)

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Introduction

On 20 August 1998, just three days after testifying before a grand jury about his relationship with Monica Lewinsky, President Bill Clinton ordered a series of cruise missile strikes against suspected terrorist sites in Afghanistan and Sudan. The missile strikes – conducted in response to the terrorist bombings of US Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania two weeks earlier – began at 1:30 p.m., EST. By that evening, before newspapers could appear the next morning, over three quarters of the public knew about them.

Over the next week the three major networks' evening newscasts – the quintessential traditional, or 'hard', news shows – presented a combined total of 69 stories on the subject. The 'soft' news media – e.g., entertainment news shows such as *Entertainment Tonight (ET)*, *Access Hollywood*, and *Extra*, as well as late-night entertainment-oriented talk shows such as *The Tonight Show* – also covered the story at length.¹ At first glance, many soft news programs look a lot like traditional news shows. Yet, they focus primarily on entertainment and human-interest themes, rather than politics or public affairs.

While many Americans doubtless learned about the missile strikes from traditional news outlets – 25–30 million viewers still watch a network evening newscast each day – many others probably learned about these events from soft news outlets. Indeed, the combined audiences for five celebrity/entertainment and tabloid TV news magazine shows alone – including *ET*, *The Insider*, *Inside Edition*, *Access Hollywood*, and *Extra* exceeds 100 million viewers per week (Tapper and Morris, 2005).

Why does it matter where people learned about the missile strikes? Most traditional news outlets focused primarily on military tactics and the political ramifications of the attacks. In contrast, the soft news media focused almost exclusively on the uncanny parallels between real-world events and what was until then a relatively obscure movie, called 'Wag the Dog'. In the film, a fictional president hires a Hollywood producer to 'produce' a phony war in order to distract the public from a sex scandal.

In the week following the strikes, out of 46 total stories on the topic presented by 12 soft news shows, 35 (or 76%) addressed the 'Wag the Dog' theme, repeatedly raising the possibility that the President may have launched the missile strikes in order to distract the nation from the Lewinsky scandal. During the same period, out of 69 network news stories on the missile strikes, only 11 (or 16%) mentioned either 'Wag the Dog' or 'Monica Lewinsky' (Baum, 2003).

In post-attack opinion polls, as many as 40% of respondents – including 25% of self-described Democrats – indicated that they believed distracting the nation was *one of the considerations* motivating President Clinton. The least-educated Americans – the primary consumers of soft news shows, but *not* of most traditional news programs – were most likely to hold these suspicions. In one survey, respondents with less than a 12th grade education were nearly twice as likely as their college-educated counterparts

¹ In a review of transcripts from 12 soft news TV shows during the same time period, I found a total of 46 stories devoted to the missile strikes (Baum, 2003).

(60% vs. 31%) to believe that the President was motivated 'a great deal' by the Lewinsky scandal (Baum, 2003).

This story illustrates at least four ways that the mass media have changed the way they cover major political stories, such as foreign policy crises, and, as a consequence, in what the public learns and believes about these events.

- More media outlets cover major political events than in the past, including the entertainment-oriented soft news media.
- When they *do* cover a political story, soft news shows do so differently than the traditional news media, focusing more on 'human drama' - and especially the character and motivations of decision-makers- as well as individual stories of heroism or tragedy, and less on the political or strategic context, or substance, of policy debates.
- Many Americans who previously ignored politics now attend to *some* information about major political events, such as wars, via the soft news media.
- Less-politically engaged Americans who learn about major events from the soft news media are more suspicious of the motives of political leaders and less supportive of their policies than their non-soft-news-consuming, or more-politically engaged counterparts.

These changes have important implications for democratic politics. Most importantly, a large number of relatively apolitical, and hence particularly persuadable, potential voters are now tuning in to politics via soft news outlets. This gives politicians an incentive to develop strategies for reaching out to soft news consumers. Such individuals care less about the nuances of policy and more about the personality of leaders and any sensational human drama that a policy, such as a war, entails. Soft news consumers care less about geopolitics than about body bags. Politicians who want their votes are therefore likely to emphasize body bags rather than geopolitics.² In short, the 'new' media environment is changing both the style and substance of politics in democracies.

In the United States, the broadcast networks created soft news programs only when they faced competition for viewers from new entrants into the television market. These new entrants only emerged when the government relaxed regulatory constraints, allowing entrepreneurs to exploit technological advances in cable and satellite technology. Hence, while the public has always been interested in these topics and themes, broadcasters only developed shows aimed at satisfying this interest when media deregulation, combined with technological advances, created an economic imperative for doing so.

Soft news programs make foreign policy more palatable by making it entertaining, and hence appealing, to members of the public who are not interested in following traditional political debates. Consequently, soft news media raise attentiveness to foreign policy crises. Because they rarely cover 'politics as usual', however, soft news

² I thank Sam Popkin for suggesting the contrast between geopolitics and body bags.

1950's	1960's	1970's	1980's	1990's	2000's
Key Sources					
•Newspapers •Radio	•Newspapers •Network TV	•Network TV •Local TV	•Network TV •Local TV •Cable TV	•Local TV •Network TV •Cable TV •Soft news	•Local TV •Network TV •Cable TV •Soft news •Internet
Key Innovations					
•TV news	•Tape-delayed video	•Cable	•More channels •Satellite coverage •"Real time" news •VCR •Soft news	•More channels •Satellite TV •Internet •More networks	•Broadband •Instant messaging
			•24-hour news cycle		

Figure 1 Evolution of Public's Primary Sources of News

does not raise *interest* in foreign policy beyond crises. When public attentiveness to crises rises, in turn, politics becomes increasingly oriented toward the interests and priorities of the newly attentive segments of the population. In the United States, soft news reorients politics toward personalities and away from policies. By looking at the American case, it becomes possible to anticipate how similar changes in mass media in other nations are likely to affect the nature of *their* politics.

A changing media marketplace

Kalb (1998a) observed, 'For the past 20 years, we have been the beneficiaries – or the victims – of a vast technological revolution that has transformed the way we get and process information.' Indeed, over the past several decades, the mass media have undergone a revolution in direct marketing. Figure 1 summarizes some of the key technological changes responsible for this revolution.

The television marketplace, once an oligopoly, is now competitive. In the 1950s and 1960s, three broadcast networks dominated the industry. They presented political information primarily through undifferentiated network evening news programs. As one network executive recalled, 'when viewers turned on the TV set, they had five choices, and the networks were three of them . . . [and they] collectively accounted for about 90% of the television audience' (Lowry 1997). The only other options available to consumers were listening to the radio, or reading a newspaper or news magazine. The television audience simply had nowhere else to go, and was therefore essentially 'captive' (Baum and Kernell, 1999).

With only a few channels, virtually all programming competed for the same audience. Consequently, programming converged to the lowest common denominator, as risk-averse broadcasters attempted to provide programming assumed to attract the largest possible portion of the overall audience. The networks considered differentiation risky and economically inefficient (Webster and Lichty, 1991).

Absent competition, the major networks faced little economic pressure to earn a profit from their 15-minute – or, beginning in 1963, 30-minute – evening news broadcasts. In December 1962, CBS creator, William Paley, told a group of CBS correspondents, ‘You guys cover the news; I’ve got Jack Benny to make money for me’ (Kalb, 1998b: 10). Paley and his counterparts at NBC and ABC saw news broadcasts as a civic responsibility, as well as a means of buying respectability in order to justify maintaining their oligopoly. In contrast, since the 1980s, the growth of cable television, satellite broadcasting, and most recently the Internet, has created a highly competitive media marketplace.

Cable television, in particular, changed news programming (Baum and Kernell, 1999, 2006). Between 1969 and 2005, the number of American households subscribing to cable expanded from 6 to 83%.³ Empowered by vigorous deregulation championed by the Reagan Administration and its successors, cable companies increased the average number of channels available to US households from less than 15 in 1983 to over 100 in 2002 (Webster and Lichty, 1991; IT Facts, 2004). By 2005, thanks to fiber optics and digital satellite broadcasting, many households received several hundred channels. With the advent of several new broadcast networks in the 1990s (e.g., FOX and the WB), even the relatively few remaining non-subscribers have more viewing alternatives. In short, consumer choices have exploded.

This increase in programming options reduced the available audience for any single program or network. The ensuing competition for viewers forced broadcasters to find new ways to raise their profit margins, such as increasing the audience for news (Kalb, 1998a, 1998b; Hallin, 1991; Hess, 1998; Grossman, 2000; Auletta, 1991), as well as lowering production costs. Their optimal strategy was no longer seeking a preponderance of TV viewers, but rather attracting a loyal niche of the audience.⁴ Consequently, as the number of competitors increased, so too did program differentiation. One important example of increasing product differentiation is the repackaging of news into inexpensively produced entertainment (Davis and Owen, 1998; Kalb, 1998b). In order to make news profitable, TV producers, for the first time, sought to make news appealing to niches of the audience that did not care very much about news. They did so by raising its entertainment value.⁵ Along these lines, CBS Chairman and CEO Michael H. Jordan reflected on this dramatically changed environment, observing: ‘Yes, we want to hold on to journalistic and other standards. But I don’t aspire to that Paleyesque role. This is a business’ (Kalb, 1998b: 10).

Television has always depended upon advertising dollars. Yet broadcasters did not recognize that news – which is far less expensive to produce in large quantities than

³ The 2005 figure include satellite subscriptions, which are functionally equivalent to cable. Cable alone accounts for about 85% of this total.

⁴ Webster and Lichty (1991) refer to this strategy as ‘counter-programming’.

⁵ Though I focus primarily on television, similar trends towards the blending of news and entertainment have occurred in elements of the radio and print media as well (Davis and Owen, 1998).

original entertainment programming (Davis and Owen, 1998; Kalb, 1998a, 1998b; Baum, 2003) – could be profitable until cable proliferated in the 1980s.

No political event better exemplified this process or its implications than the 1991 Persian Gulf War, which the mass media, most notably CNN, transformed into one of the most successful ongoing television sagas of all time. The following quote from Danny Schechter, a former producer at CNN and ABC's news magazine show *20/20*, illustrates this point:

It started with the Gulf War – the packaging of news, the graphics, the music, the classification of stories. . . . Everybody benefited by saturation coverage. The more channels, the more a sedated public will respond to this If you can get an audience hooked, breathlessly awaiting every fresh disclosure with a recognizable cast of characters they can either love or hate, with a dramatic arc and a certain coming down to a deadline, you have a winner in terms of building audience. (Scott, 1998)

Steven Brill, Editor-in-Chief of *Brill's Content*, characterizes the post-Gulf War media environment as follows: 'what we have is a new media culture where the exact same dynamics . . . are at work whether the story is about a sex scandal or whether it's a life-and-death story about a war'.⁶

Blending foreign policy and entertainment

What is soft news?

TV producers concluded that attracting a broader audience to news programming required making it entertaining, that is, more palatable to people that do not much like news. After all, millions of Americans who are *not* political junkies have little patience for traditional political dialogue. Soft news accomplishes this goal by blending news and entertainment. 'Soft news' refers to a set of story characteristics, including the absence of a public policy component, sensationalized presentation, human-interest themes and emphasis on dramatic subject matter, such as crime and disaster (Patterson, 2000; Baum, 2003, 2005). As Zaller (2003: 129) states, 'soft news is information that is either personally useful or merely entertaining'.

While virtually all news or information oriented media present at least *some* stories possessing some or all of these characteristics, only a subset focus *primarily* on such material, largely – though not necessarily entirely – to the exclusion of most traditional political or public policy topics. These are the 'soft news media'. They include syndicated, celebrity-oriented entertainment TV news magazines (e.g., *ET*, *Access Hollywood*),⁷ tabloid TV news magazines (e.g., *Inside Edition*, *A Current Affair*),⁸ network news

⁶ Comments made during CNN's 'Reliable Sources' program, 6/19/99.

⁷ These programs look much like traditional newscasts. However, in place of traditional news reports, they predominantly cover entertainment-oriented topics and themes.

⁸ These shows are so-named because they tend to mirror the format and content of traditional tabloid newspapers.

magazine shows (e.g., *Dateline*),⁹ and daytime and late-night entertainment-oriented talk shows (e.g., *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *The Late Show with David Letterman*, respectively).¹⁰ While these various program formats clearly differ in many respects, they share in common a predominant focus on soft news topics and themes.¹¹

The soft news audience

Americans have a strong appetite for soft news in all its forms, including celebrity magazines, such as *People*, and 'shock-jock' radio programs, such as *The Howard Stern Show*. Most of all, Americans prefer soft news on TV. In one 1998 survey (Pew Center, 1998a), a larger percentage of respondents (78%) reported watching TV news magazine shows such as *60 Minutes*, *20/20*, or *Dateline* at least 'sometimes' than reported watching the network evening news (67%).¹² In the same survey, nearly as many respondents reported watching tabloid news programs such as *Hard Copy* or *Inside Edition* (47%) as CNN (57%). The self-reported tabloid audience, in turn, was *at least* as large as those for cable news channels – including CNBC (39%), MSNBC (32%), ESPN (40%), and FOX (47%) – or the three network TV morning variety programs (*CBS This Morning*, *Good Morning America*, and *The Today Show*) combined (42%). An additional 35% and 28% of respondents, respectively, reported watching *ET* and daytime TV talk shows.

Polls conducted over the next six years found this overall pattern largely holding steady. In 2000 (Pew Center, 2000), 31% of respondents reported watching daytime talk shows, such as *Oprah Winfrey* or *Rosie O'Donnell* (the two most popular shows in this genre at the time, both of which attract predominantly female audiences). The corresponding percentages for *ET* and network news magazine shows were 36% and 72%, respectively. In 2004 (Pew Center, 2004), 34% and 35% of respondents, respectively, claimed to watch entertainment news magazine shows (such as *ET* or *Access Hollywood*) and late night (entertainment-oriented) talk shows (such as Leno

⁹ Network newsmagazine shows look much like traditional newscasts. Yet they emphasize feature stories that are typically lengthier than reports on traditional news programs.

¹⁰ Late-night talk shows typically feature interviews with celebrities, as well as comic skits and monologues by the hosts, after whom the shows are usually named. Daytime talk shows also feature interviews with celebrities and other noteworthy individuals. However, rather than emphasizing comedy, they tend to feature dramatic, human-interest topics.

¹¹ There are, of course, some gray areas. One obvious case in point is local TV news, which inspired the unflattering cliché 'if it bleeds, it leads'. Some readers might also argue that network news magazines belong in the hard news category. Yet, recent content analysis studies (Zaller, 1999; Kalb, 1998a; CCJ, 1998) have found that network TV news magazines focus *primarily* on soft news topics, such as celebrity profiles and crime dramas. While, in turn, local TV news shows certainly offers large doses of soft news, they routinely cover traditional local, national and international political and policy issues. According to a study of 49 stations in 15 cities (Rosenstiel *et al.*, 2000), 'politics and government' is second only to 'crime and law' as the most prevalent topic on local TV newscasts. Hence, by my definition, local TV news is not a soft news outlet. Indeed, upon careful inspection, in the vast majority of instances, the differences between 'soft' and 'traditional' news outlets is fairly stark.

¹² All figures in this section represent the percentage of respondents who reported watching a program 'sometimes' or 'regularly'.

or Letterman). Fifteen percent of respondents reported watching the Comedy Central cable network's so-called 'fake' news show, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*.¹³

Of course, news consumption differs dramatically across different groups of Americans. For instance, according to the 2000 American National Election Study (NES), the *least* politically informed respondents report watching daytime TV talk shows about twice as frequently as the *most* politically informed respondents.¹⁴ In contrast, the *most* informed respondents report watching 127% more network news than the *least* informed respondents.

Differentiating NES respondents by education level, rather than political information, reveals similar patterns (though the differences are somewhat larger for talk shows and smaller for network news watching). In another survey (Pew Center, 1998b), respondents who did not graduate from high school report watching tabloid news magazine programs and daytime talk shows on television about 40% and 144% more often, respectively, than their counterparts possessing a college or post-graduate degree.

Nielsen ratings for the most popular entertainment/celebrity-oriented TV news magazine shows, broken out by education, mirror these survey results. In October 2002, for instance, the ratings for *ET*, *Access Hollywood*, *Extra*, and *Inside Edition* were, on average, 26% higher for respondents lacking a college education, compared to their college-educated counterparts. In contrast, college-educated respondents in the aforementioned 1998 survey (Pew Center, 1998b) reported watching national network news and the Jim Lehrer News Hour 18% and 62% more often, respectively, than their counterparts who did not graduate from high school.¹⁵

Comparing the demographic breakdowns of the TV audience at different times of the day and evening provides additional insight into the differences between hard and soft news audiences. For instance, Figure 2 indicates that, as of July 2002, only about 40% of adult viewers watching network television between 11:00 p.m. and 1:00 a.m. – during which local newscasts and late-night entertainment talk shows dominate the airwaves – attended *any* college. Even fewer (36%) typical daytime (9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.) television viewers have attended college (36%). The corresponding figures for the network Sunday morning political interview programs (quintessential 'hard' news shows viewed primarily by political sophisticates) *Meet the Press* (NBC) and *Face the Nation* (CBS) are 60% and 53%, respectively. In other words, according to these data,

¹³ Relative to 1998, the only significant changes in 2004 were increases of 8 and 12 percentage points (from 47 to 55%, and from 32 to 44%), for MSNBC and FOX, respectively, and a 13-percentage point decline (from 78 to 65%) for network news magazine shows.

¹⁴ Political information levels are based on the NES interviewers' estimate, which consist of a 5-point scale.

¹⁵ Similar media consumption patterns (for both hard and soft news shows) emerge in Pew surveys conducted in 1996 and 2000 (not shown).

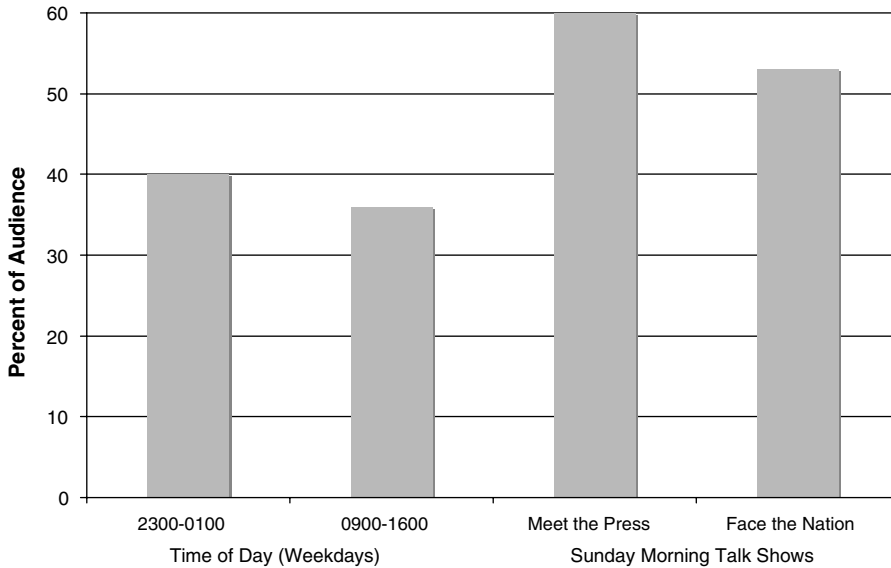


Figure 2 Percent of Audience That Attended College
 Source: A. C. Nielsen

typical adult *Meet the Press* and *Face the Nation* viewers are, on average, substantially better educated than typical daytime or late-night TV viewers.¹⁶

How much foreign crisis coverage?

Soft news outlets matter for foreign policy because they cover it. While these shows focus primarily on such topics as celebrity gossip, scandal, crime, and natural disasters, when foreign crises emerge, they nearly always cover them. For instance, Figure 3 presents the trends in the volume of coverage of 9/11 and its aftermath on two tabloid/entertainment-oriented newsmagazine shows – *Extra* and *Inside Edition* – and on ABC's *World News Tonight*, a representative traditional news show.

In the first three weeks after 9/11, both *Extra* and *Inside Edition* devoted nearly all of their airtime to the issue. In contrast, the maximum proportion for ABC News for any single month between September 2001 and August 2002 was just below 50%. This pattern was fairly short-lived. By November 2001, *Extra* featured considerably less coverage of 9/11 than ABC News. However, *Inside Edition* continued to outpace ABC News (proportionately) through January 2002. Overall, *Extra* and *Inside Edition* covered 9/11 extensively, though they did not sustain their coverage as long as ABC News. Viewers of these shows during Fall 2001 could hardly have failed to gain at least some information about 9/11.

¹⁶ Source: Nielsen Media Research, 'NTI NAD Report', July 2002. All percentages are for adults over age 18, and are based on the education level for heads of households.

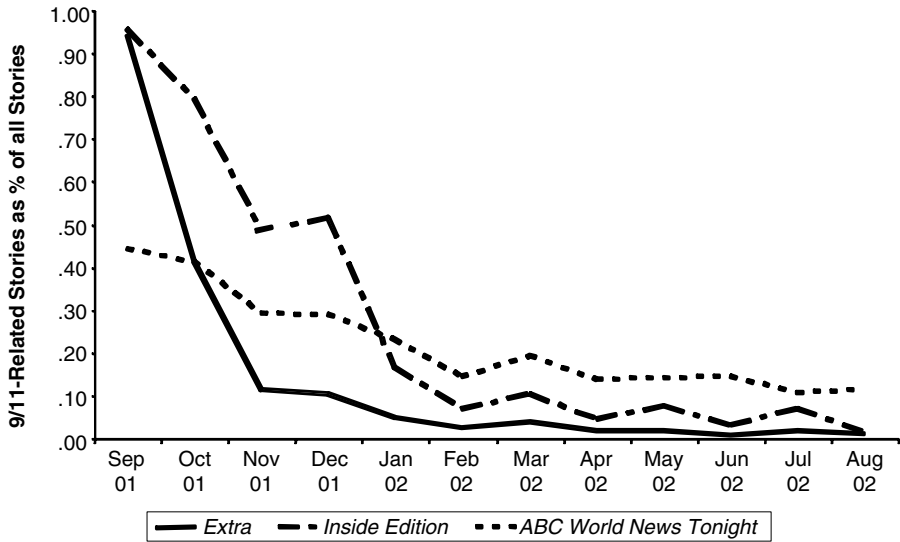


Figure 3 Percentage of all Stories on *Extra*, *Inside Edition* and *ABC World News Tonight* Related to 9/11 or its Aftermath, September 2001 through August 2002
Sources: Baum (2003)

This pattern is not exceptional. Soft news outlets covered every major US foreign policy crisis in the 1990s, including US military interventions in Panama, Iraq, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo, as well as the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan (Baum, 2003) and the 2003 war in Iraq (Baum, 2004). For instance, between 1995 and 1999, nine daytime and late-night talk shows covered Bosnia and Kosovo in a combined total of 273 separate broadcasts (Baum, 2003).¹⁷ The corresponding total for four entertainment/tabloid news magazine shows was 164 separate broadcasts.¹⁸ Though not comparable in breadth or depth to coverage by traditional news outlets (Baum, 2003), these figures are far from trivial.

Why and how the soft news media cover foreign crises

The soft news media cover foreign crises because they are easily framed as compelling human dramas. Similar to crime, disaster and scandal, foreign crises involve such dramatic themes as good vs. evil, violence, heroism, and tragedy. These are the bread and butter of the soft news media. By emphasizing the dramatic aspects of foreign crises, the soft news media have successfully tapped a previously under-exploited market demand for information about foreign policy crises.

¹⁷ The nine talk shows include those hosted by Jay Leno, David Letterman, Conan O'Brien, Oprah Winfrey, Rosie O'Donnell, Geraldo Rivera, Regis Philbin, Bill Maher, and Phil Donahue.

¹⁸ The four tabloid/entertainment news magazine shows include *ET*, *Extra*, *Inside Edition* and *A Current Affair*.

Far more than traditional news outlets, soft news programs employ episodic frames, which focus on *individual* stories of moral failing, hardship, and tragedy, or heroism in the face of extraordinary danger. In other words, soft news shows focus on the travails of individuals, rather than the broader implications or consequences of policies. In contrast, soft news outlets employ far fewer thematic frames, which place a story into a broader context by, for instance, discussing the origins of a conflict or the goals of the actors involved (Iyengar, 1991). In general, soft news outlets are far less likely than their traditional news counterparts to consider a given conflict as a whole or the circumstances surrounding it (Baum, 2004).

A case in point is soft news coverage of Operation Desert Fox, a four-day aerial bombing campaign by the United States and Great Britain against Iraq in December 1998. *Inside Edition* covered the air strike campaign in three broadcasts, two of which addressed the dangers of domestic terrorism. The third told the story of Staff Sgt. Jeff Berry of the US Air Force, who was forced to postpone his planned wedding due to his deployment to the Persian Gulf. *Access Hollywood*, in turn, focused on the curious timing of the air strikes, which took place on the eve of President Clinton's impeachment trial in the Senate.

The 'Wag the Dog' theme dominated coverage on *The Daily Show*, as well as on other late night talk shows, including David Letterman, Jay Leno, and Conan O'Brien. *Extra*, in turn, covered the air strike campaign in 12 segments, across six separate broadcasts. Each segment focused on the reactions of celebrities, the threat of domestic terrorism, or the proximity of the air strikes to the president's impeachment trial. Network news magazines— including *Dateline*, *20/20*, *48 Hours* and *60 Minutes*— offered more varied coverage. But they also featured large doses of the 'Wag the Dog' theme, as well as extended discussions of the risks of domestic terrorism.

To compare coverage of Operation Desert Fox across differing news formats, a research assistant and I each reviewed five soft and hard news programs from December 18th, a randomly selected day during the air strike campaign. These included the *CBS Evening News*, the early and late local news broadcasts of Los Angeles CBS Affiliate KCBS, David Letterman and *Extra*.

The CBS Evening News devoted most of a special 60-minute broadcast that evening to President Clinton's impending impeachment trial in the Senate and Desert Fox, including nine stories on the impeachment trial and five on the situation in Iraq. Of the nine impeachment stories, only two mentioned Iraq, and both were merely passing references. The primary themes were the Administration's strategy in preparing for the trial and partisan conflict between Democrats and Republicans. The newscast also reported on Hustler publisher Larry Flint's investigation into alleged marital infidelity by Republican House Speaker Bob Livingston.

The five Desert Fox stories made no mention of the Lewinsky scandal or the impeachment trial. Instead, they described the progress of the air strike campaign. Topics included US military power (e.g., a reporter reviewing the types of weapons used in Desert Fox, from the deck of an aircraft carrier), allied military strategy, and

international protests against the air strikes. The dominant frames in these broadcasts were *power* and *conflict*, both of which were thematic; that is, presented within the broader context of the air strike campaign.¹⁹

Local news broadcasts drew a clearer connection between the impeachment trial and Iraq. In one story, the reporter talked about ‘two battlefields: one in Baghdad, one in the capitol . . . the difference is that the president is in charge of one and not the other’. Despite this linkage, local news reports rarely questioned the president’s motives. Most impeachment-related stories made only passing reference to Iraq; *none* of the Desert Fox reports mentioned the impeachment trial. In reporting on the air strikes, local news coverage, more than the *CBS Evening News*, emphasized dramatic visuals and included reports about US military power and Saddam Hussein. Reports on Saddam exemplified the propensity of local news to frame war stories as battles between ‘good vs. evil’ or ‘heroes vs. villains’.

Turning to the soft news media, *Extra* covered Desert Fox quite differently from local or national newscasts. That evening’s episode profiled NBC reporter Donatella Lorch, emphasizing her live reporting from Baghdad. The report showed Lorch dressed in battle fatigues and helmet, while simultaneously showing her mother watching and worrying aloud about the dangers her daughter faced. The anchor commented how ‘she looks so much like her mom’. The report offered no commentary on the conflict, instead focusing on Lorch’s emergence as a media celebrity. The predominant (episodic) frame employed in the story was *human impact* (Neuman *et al.*, 1992), with an emphasis on family and celebrity.

David Letterman devoted much of that evening’s monologue to jokes explicitly connecting Desert Fox and the impeachment trial. Overall, about half of Letterman’s jokes suggested a direct link between the two events. For instance, Letterman quipped that President Clinton had prepared for the war by helping an intern hide underneath a desk.

In sum, as we move ‘down market’ from the *CBS Evening News*, to local news, to the soft news media, we observe a steady trend toward drawing more explicit linkages between the impeachment trial and Desert Fox, along with greater emphasis on personal (episodic) stories and sensational or dramatic themes.

Finally, it is important to bear in mind that policymakers facilitate ‘cheap framing’ (Baum, 2003) by the soft news media – that is, highly accessible, episodic coverage of sensationalized human drama – by portraying America’s adversaries as the embodiment of evil, thereby turning virtually any foreign crises into a morality play. For instance, following 9/11, President George W. Bush repeatedly referred to the hijackers as ‘evildoers’. US policymakers, in turn, have routinely compared America’s adversaries, such as Saddam Hussein and Slobadan Milosevic, to Adolph Hitler (Baum, 2003). This provides soft news shows with a ready-made, user-friendly frame, allowing them to

¹⁹ For my purposes, a *power* frame emphasizes the overwhelming military dominance of the US and NATO, while a *conflict* frame merely describes events on the battlefield.

'package' a foreign crisis in a manner easily understood by and compelling to their relatively apolitical viewers.

Giving the people what they want

Dramatic human-interest stories appeal to entertainment-seeking audiences. For instance, Lisa Gregorish-Dempsey, Director of Reality Programming at FOX and a former producer of the tabloid TV show 'Hard Copy', commented, in an interview with the author, that according to focus group research, the audiences for her shows are especially interested in 'fear and loathing' stories.

Typical viewers watch soft news primarily, albeit not necessarily exclusively, to be entertained. Soft news consumption varies hardly at all with survey respondents' overall interest in national politics or international affairs. The best predictors of soft news consumption are interest in news about crime, celebrities, and entertainment (Baum, 2003). These latter topics typically involve episodic stories about compelling personalities or intense human drama. To the extent these latter characteristics draw audiences to soft news shows, this suggests that a *political* story is more likely to interest soft news audiences if it involves the same characteristics.

Along these lines, in an interview with the author, Barry Berk (producer of *Access Hollywood*), explained why, when a US pilot was shot down over Kosovo in 1999, his show interviewed celebrities such as Tom Hanks about the incident. He noted that focus group research indicated that the show's audience was primarily interested in getting to know celebrities. Berk viewed this incident as a novel opportunity to help the show's audience gain insight into the minds of celebrities, and to see them as 'regular' people. By covering an episodic story of a heroic US pilot struggling to survive behind enemy lines, from the perspective of Hollywood celebrities, *Access Hollywood* made war coverage compelling for viewers who might not otherwise be interested in following the war.

Making news entertaining has paid enormous dividends for cable and network broadcasters. For instance, about seven million viewers watch a typical episode of *ET*. The show reportedly earns more than \$100 million per year (Tapper and Morris, 2005). As noted earlier, each week over 100 million viewers, in total, watch five entertainment-oriented news magazine shows alone. In comparison, a combined total of between 125 and 150 million viewers per week watch the nightly newscasts of ABC, CBS, and NBC. The combined total audience for the major all-cable networks (CNN, FOX, MSNBC, and CNBC) is about one-tenth of that for network news. When one factors in the many other soft news venues on television, the soft news TV audience is *at least* as large as the combined audiences for network and cable news.

Attentiveness to foreign policy

The range of program formats offering news about foreign crises has expanded dramatically over the past two decades. There exists a soft news outlet designed specifically to appeal to virtually every entertainment-oriented taste and preference. Among politically inattentive individuals, in turn, consuming soft news is associated

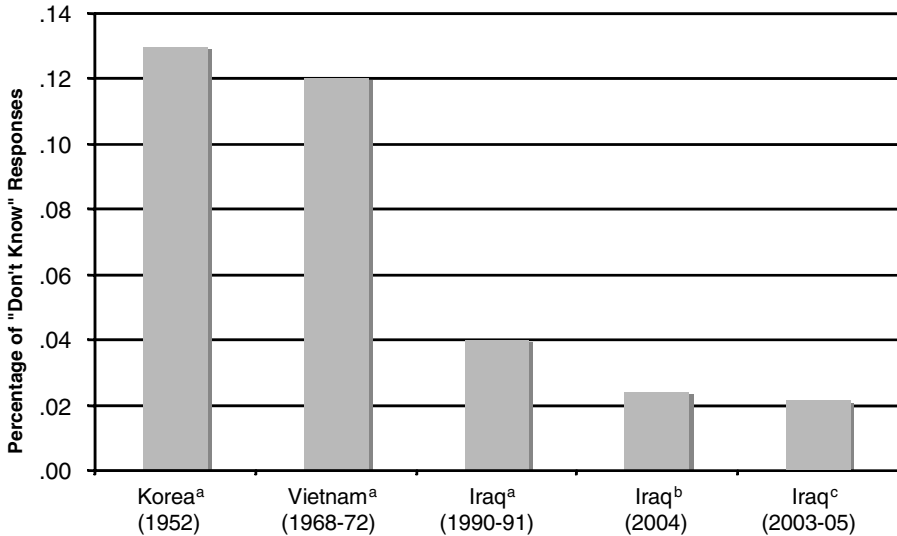


Figure 4 Percent of Respondents Without Opinion on Wars in Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq. QUESTIONS: (a) 'Do you think we did the right thing in [getting involved in the war in Korea or Vietnam/sending US forces to the Persian Gulf] or should we have stayed out?' (NES 1952, 1968–72, 1990–91). (b) 'Taking everything into account, do you think the war in Iraq has been worth the cost or not?' (NES 2004). (c) 'Considering everything, do you think the United States did the right thing in going to war with Iraq or do you think it was a mistake?' (ABC/*Washington Post*, 3/27/03, 4/9/03, 4/15/04, 3/10/05, 6/26/05).

with greater attentiveness to foreign crises (Baum, 2003). Consequently, a broader cross-section of the public is attentive to foreign crises than in prior decades. This increased attentiveness is independent of interest in news, politics, or foreign policy. Indeed, research (e.g., Delli-Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Bennett, n.d.; Baum 2003) indicates that the American public has *not* grown more interested in politics or foreign affairs.²⁰

For instance, as Figures 4 and 5 show, many more Americans had opinions about the 1991 Iraq war than about the wars in Korea or Vietnam. More still had opinions about the 2003 Iraq war.

Yet, Figure 6 shows that more Americans ranked Vietnam as the nation's *most important problem* than did so during either Iraq war, while Americans in 1952 considered the Korean War similarly important as their counterparts in 1990–91 and

²⁰ Based on a similar logic, Stromberg and Pratt (2005) demonstrate that the introduction of commercial TV in Sweden led to an increase in political information among voters, even though the proportion of political information, relative to other types of programming, was lower in commercial than state controlled TV. The reason is that even though better informed individuals tend to consume more public TV, less informed individuals, who tend not to watch much public TV, gain *some* political information from commercial TV, which caters more to their preferences. The result is a net increase in political information among the less-politically engaged members of the public.

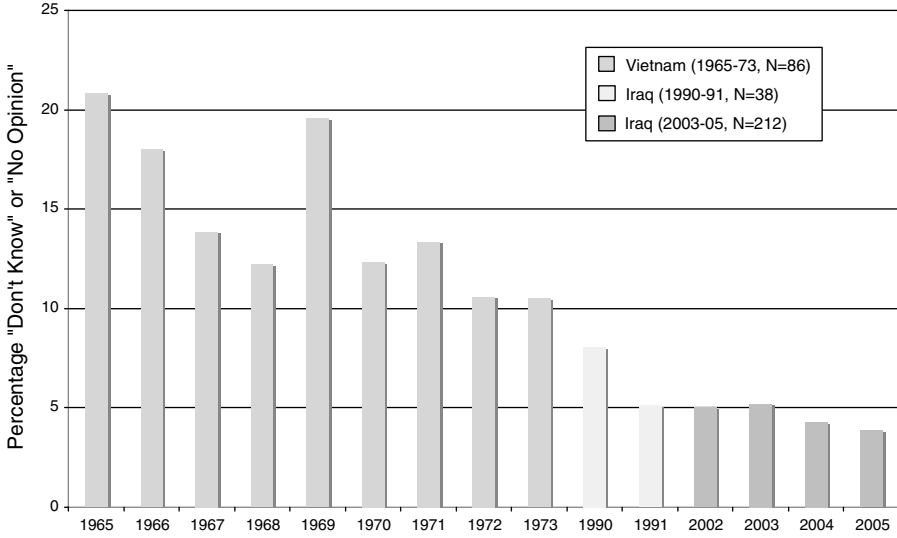


Figure 5 Annualized Percentage of “Don’t Know” or “No Opinion” Responses: Vietnam, Iraq I and Iraq II

QUESTION: “Do you approve or disapprove of the way (President) [Johnson/Nixon/G.H.W. Bush/G.W. Bush] is handling the situation [in/with] [Vietnam/Iraq]?”

Sources: *Baum (2003), Lexis-Nexis*

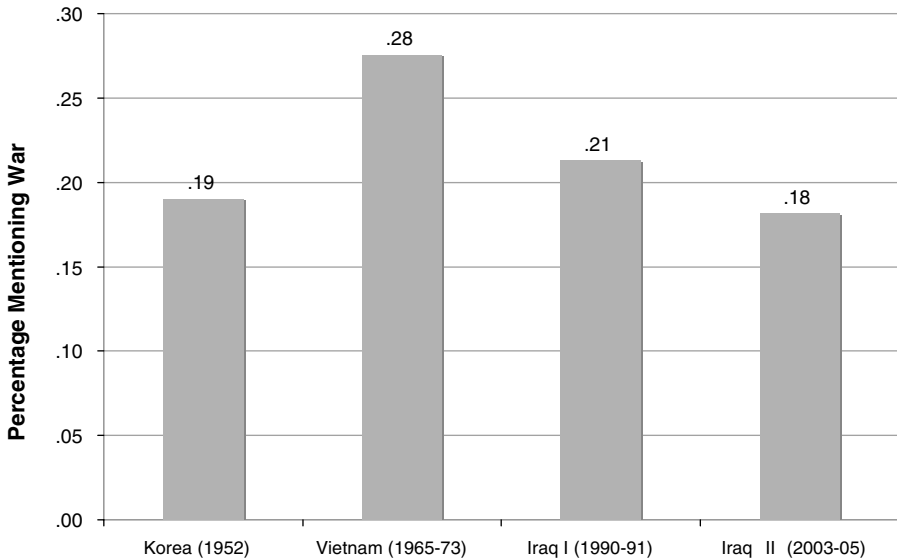


Figure 6 Percentage of Survey Respondents Naming Wars as the Nation’s Most Important Problem.

Sources: *Baum (2003), Lexis-Nexis*

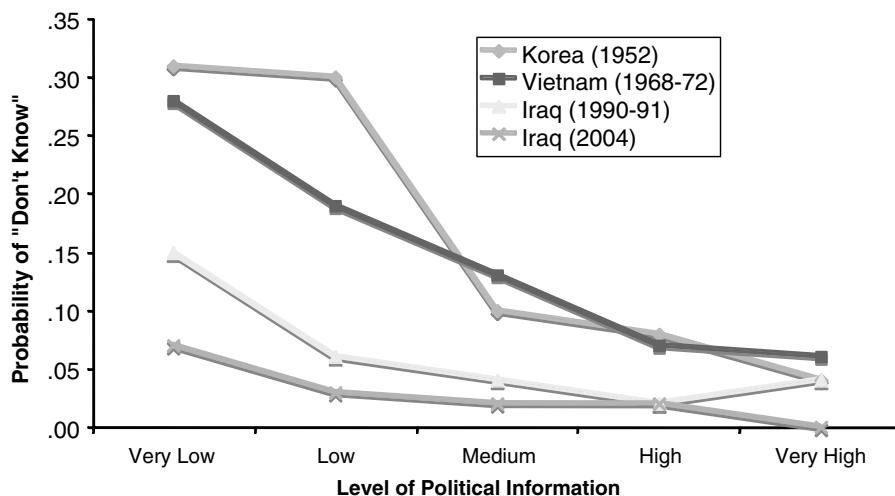


Figure 7 Probability of Lacking an Opinion About a War, by Political Information
Source: NES Surveys, 1952–2004

2003–05 considered the two Iraq conflicts.²¹ The 1991 Persian Gulf War, in turn, took place at a time when, due to the end of the Cold War, fewer Americans were concerned about foreign affairs than at any time since World War II. Following 9/11, concern with foreign affairs understandably rebounded. Despite this upswing, Figure 6 indicates that, on average, fewer Americans rated the second Iraq War (2003–05) as the nation's most urgent problem than did so during the first war in Iraq (1990–91). In fact, in 1991, more Americans considered the first Iraq war important than was the case for the second Iraq War in 2003, 2004, or 2005.

Most of the aforementioned increase in 'opinionation' – that is, willingness to express an opinion – is located among the *least* educated or politically knowledgeable segments of the public, who constitute the core soft news audience (Baum, 2003). Figure 7 compares 'don't know' rates – the percentage of respondents answering 'don't know' to a war-related question – across NES respondents at different levels of political information (as estimated by NES interviewers). The graphic includes separate curves for Korea, Vietnam, Iraq I, and Iraq II.

At lower levels of political knowledge, the four conflicts line up in perfect chronological order, with the highest 'don't know' rates during Korea and the lowest during the second Iraq war. The opinion gap across the wars shrinks as political information rises, all but disappearing at the highest information level. Highly informed Americans have always found ample sources of information about politics and foreign

²¹ In the 1970 NES, a larger percentage of respondents indicated that they considered Vietnam personally important (70%) than so rated the Persian Gulf War in the 1990/91 NES (63%). The corresponding survey question is not available for Korea or the 2003 Iraq War.

Table 1. Frequency of watching all-news cable channels, by education, 1992–2004

	High school diploma or less		College degree or more	
	Regularly/ sometimes	Hardly ever/never	Regularly/ sometimes	Hardly ever/never
02/20/92	0.67	0.33	0.73	0.27
04/19/96	0.55	0.45	0.68	0.32
05/07/98	0.58	0.42	0.57	0.43
06/09/02	0.65	0.35	0.72	0.28
06/08/04	0.68	0.32	0.72	0.28

Note: In 2000, the Pew Center 'Biennial Media Consumption' survey asked respondents about their consumption of specific cable news outlets, rather than their overall consumption of 'all-news cable channels'.

policy. However, for their less-politically informed counterparts, the information environment has changed dramatically over the past two decades. Since the late 1980s, and increasingly so over the past decade, many of these latter individuals have been able to consume information about a foreign crisis *primarily* through the soft news media. Moreover, they tend to be less wedded to their political attitudes, and hence more persuadable, than their better-informed counterparts (Zaller, 1992, 2004). Exposure to soft news is thus more likely to influence apolitical individuals than political sophisticates.

The proliferation of traditional news-oriented cable outlets such as CNN and FOX, beginning in the 1980s and accelerating in the 1990s, could also account, at least in significant measure, for increased opinionation regarding war in 1991, relative to the 1950s and 1960s, or in 2003. Yet, Baum (2003: 165–167) reports that among less-politically informed NES respondents, variations in local or national TV news consumption had no statistically significant effect on attentiveness to the 1991 Persian Gulf War. As respondents' political information increased, however, exposure to traditional TV news became positively associated with attention to the war. Additionally, as shown in Table 1, a series of polls (Pew Center, 1992, 1996, 1998a, 2002, 2004) reveal no consistent trend toward increased consumption of cable news between 1992 and 2004. About the same percentage of respondents reported watching cable news in 1992 as in 2002 and 2004.

Figure 8, in turn, shows substantial *declines* from 1993 to 2004 in overall consumption of both local (top section) and network TV (bottom section) news, across all education levels.

Finally, Table 2 presents the results from three polls (Pew Center, 1996, 2000, 2004) which show that, among college-educated respondents, self-reported use of the Internet for purposes of accessing news increased substantially between 1996 and 2004. However, the trend among non-college-educated respondents is far less pronounced.

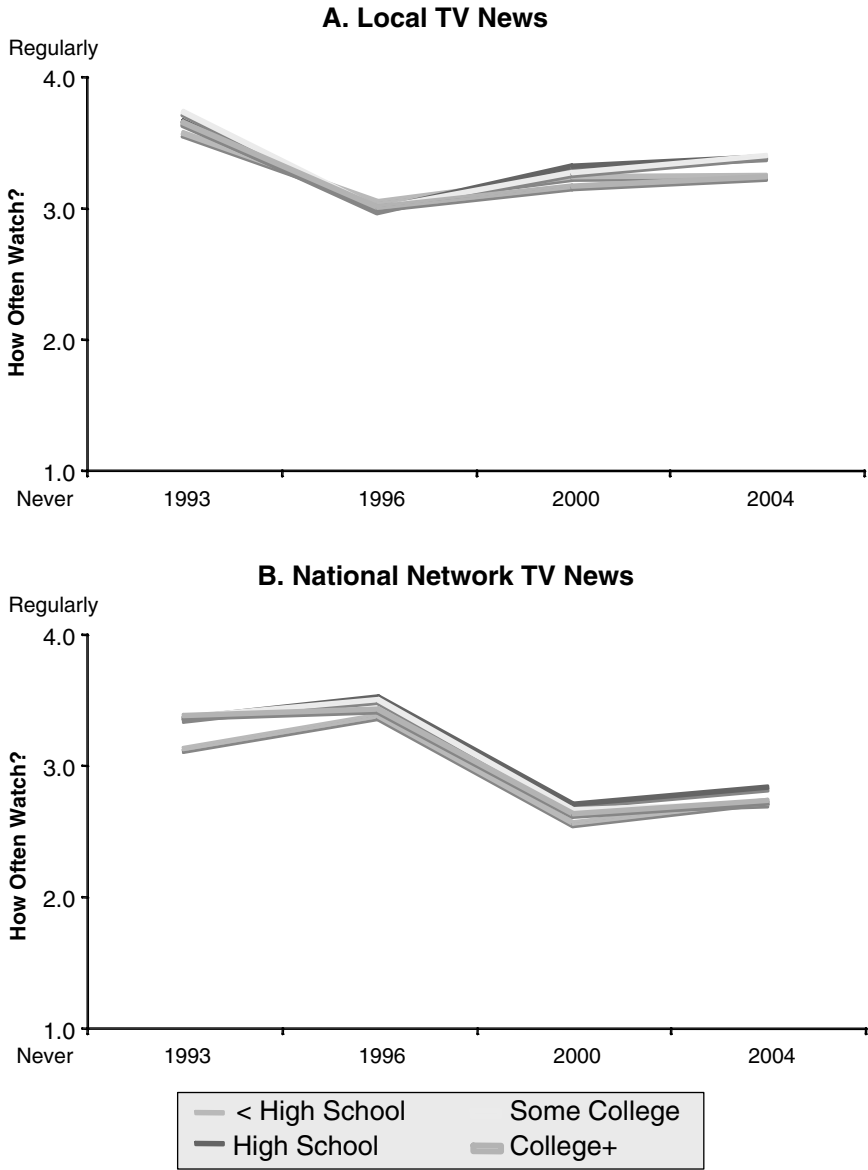


Figure 8 Frequency of Watching News, by Education, 1993–2004
 Source: *Pew Center surveys, various years*

In 2004, among respondents who did not attend college, the mean frequency of using the Internet for news remained ‘less than once every few weeks’. These same respondents reported watching, on average, about 15 minutes of TV news *each day*. This suggests that, at least for less-educated Americans, the Internet remains far less consequential than television as a source of news and information about public

Table 2. Average frequency of going online for news, by education, 1996–2004

Education level	1996	2000	2004
Did not graduate High School	Never	Less than once every few weeks	Less than once every few weeks
High school graduate	Never	Less than once every few weeks	Less than once every few weeks
Attended some college	Never	Once every few weeks	Once every few weeks
College or post-graduate degree	Less than once every few weeks	1–2 days-per-week	1–2 days-per-week

affairs. Taken together, these data suggest that among the less-educated and politically inattentive members of the public, the proliferation of traditional news outlets and the Internet over the past two decades cannot account – at least not in large measure – for increased opinionation during the second Iraq war, relative to the first. Conversely, the proliferation of the soft news media does appear capable of accounting for this increase. Indeed, among politically inattentive individuals, the soft news media influence both attentiveness to and attitudes toward foreign crises. This is changing politics in America.

Changing politics

Scholars have long pondered the barriers to information and political participation confronting democratic citizens. Some of these barriers are falling. Where America's foreign policy was once the domain of a fairly small 'foreign policy elite', the soft news media have, to some extent, democratized foreign policy. Many Americans used to go about their lives largely oblivious of their leaders' foreign policy decisions, despite the potentially profound effects of those decisions on their lives. While contemporary Americans care no more about foreign policy than their parents and grandparents – according to some survey data, even after 9/11 (Kurtz, 2002) – they are *more* likely to be *exposed* to the nation's overseas activities, at least those involving military conflict. A number of implications – for both public opinion and voting behavior (the demand side of politics), as well as for political leaders (the supply side) – follow from these developments.

Expanding demand for political news

If an individual gains most of her political information from soft news shows, the issues she encounters in those shows will be more accessible to her – that is, prominent in her mind – than other political issues not covered by soft news outlets. As more Americans gain political information from soft news outlets, in turn, the topics such shows cover – such as foreign crises, crime, disaster and scandal – become increasingly salient to the American public, relative to other types of political issues – such as

geopolitics or the state of the economy – that soft news shows mostly ignore. The less-educated and less-politically engaged members of the public – the heaviest consumers of most soft news programs – drive this aggregate trend.

Survey data reflect this pattern (Baum, 2003). For instance, when Gallup (1998) asked respondents to name the major problems facing the nation, soft news consumers without a college education were substantially more likely than their non-soft-news-consuming or college-educated counterparts to mention issues involving foreign affairs/national security, terrorism, crime, scandal, or morality. These are the primary topics of most soft news outlets (Baum, 2003; Media Monitor, 1997). In contrast, soft news consumption had no effect on respondents' propensity to mention anything involving the state of the economy, a prominent topic soft news programs typically ignore (Baum, 2003).

Over time, trends tell the same story. Between 1966 and 1998, non-college-educated NES respondents grew *increasingly* likely to mention 'major problems' involving foreign affairs/national defense or public order – the latter of which primarily entails crime, morality, and scandal – and *less* likely to mention other types of political issues. This pattern weakens as education increases; among college-educated respondents there is no discernable trend (Baum, 2003). This evidence is circumstantial. Yet, these trends are precisely what one would anticipate *if* the rise of the soft news media had altered the content of political information attended to by relatively apolitical members of the public, while the nature and extent of information consumed by their more-politically engaged counterparts remained largely unchanged.

Soft news coverage of politics also affects voting behavior (Baum, 2003, 2005). During the 2000 election, both major-party presidential candidates appeared on multiple daytime and late-night, entertainment-oriented talk shows. In the 2000 NES, *less*-politically aware viewers of daytime talk shows such as Oprah Winfrey or Rosie O'Donnell – but *not* their more highly aware counterparts – were more likely to find the opposition party candidate 'likeable', as well as to cross party lines and vote for him.²² The reason is that entertainment talk shows were far friendlier to candidates than the traditional news media (Baum, 2005). Oprah Winfrey describes her program's priorities as follows:

[O]ur mission statement for 'The Oprah Winfrey Show' is to use television to transform people's lives, to make viewers see themselves differently and to bring happiness and a sense of fulfillment into every home . . . Over the years, I have not found that interviewing politicians about the issues worked for my viewing audience. I try to bring issues that people understand through their hearts and their feelings so they can make decisions. (Feder, 2000)

This is not an environment where one would anticipate a hard-nosed, skeptical grilling of a political candidate, or divisive partisan bickering. In fact, a content analysis

²² 'Less' ('more') politically aware is defined as a half standard deviation below (above) the mean in the survey.

of all candidate TV interviews in 2000 confirms that daytime and late-night talk show interviews with presidential candidates were substantially less combative, more supportive of the interview subjects, and less partisan, than candidate interviews or other forms of campaign coverage in more traditional TV news venues (Baum, 2005).

Finally, while soft news coverage of politics includes substantially less policy content than hard news reporting, such programs nevertheless *do* impart substantive information to viewers. Consequently, for instance, relatively apolitical soft news consumers are also more likely than their non-soft-news-consuming counterparts to vote for the presidential candidate that most closely matches their self-described social/cultural and policy preferences (Baum and Jamison, 2006).

Changing the content of politics

Soft news coverage of politics forces political leaders to alter their public communication strategies. For instance, when Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice travels abroad, she often arranges an airport photo opportunity with a local celebrity. In Tokyo, she posed for photographs with a popular Japanese–American sumo wrestling champion; in Romania, she met with Olympic legend Nadia Comaneci. These celebrity ‘photo ops’ are aimed at exciting the local media, so that they will pay more attention to the Secretary’s visit and thereby transmit her messages to segments of the local population that might otherwise ignore news about a visiting American diplomat. One official predicted that Romanians ‘will go crazy’ over the secretary’s meeting with Comaneci (Brinkley, 2005).

Presidential public communication is another case in point. The bully pulpit is, arguably, the president’s most important source of political influence (Kernell, 1997). Whenever presidents wish to undertake major foreign policy initiatives, they typically seek to explain their policies to the American people, in the hopes of gaining the public’s support, or at least its acquiescence. Since the 1960s, presidents have relied primarily on prime time, nationally televised speeches and press conferences for this purpose. They have also dispatched their senior foreign policy advisors to conduct interviews on the political TV talk show circuit (e.g., *Meet the Press*).

In the current era of fragmented media, however, presidents can no longer rely on nationally televised prime time speeches, or appearances by their lieutenants on Sunday morning talk shows, to communicate to a majority of the American public. Cable and satellite television – including the soft news media – have robbed presidents and their representatives of much of their audience (Baum and Kernell, 1999 and 2006; Hess, 1998). Indeed, as the television marketplace continues to fragment, and as viewers are better able to identify programming tailored to their own personal tastes and preferences, politicians confront a fundamental paradigm shift. No longer can they merely send out a broadcast signal – exemplified by a presidential prime time speech or press conference – and, in effect, wait for the audience to come to them. Instead, they must increasingly seek out the audience.

Communicating with the public requires locating information where the target audience will notice it. This involves tailoring messages to the sensibilities of soft news audiences, who constitute a large pool of relatively persuadable potential voters. Political sophisticates and ideologues – the core audience for most traditional news outlets – tend to counter-argue any information inconsistent with their preexisting preferences (Zaller, 1992; Campbell *et al.*, 1960; McGuire, 1968). This implies that appeals by political leaders are unlikely to change the minds of most hard news enthusiasts. In contrast, political messages are more likely to persuade soft news viewers, *if they receive them* (Baum, 2005). Millions of voters, in turn, base their votes more on candidates' personal characteristics – the predominant emphasis of soft news shows – than their policy positions, upon which traditional news outlets place relatively greater emphasis. This gives strategic politicians a strong incentive to focus more of their communication efforts on this hitherto largely ignored portion of the electorate. As Bennett (1999) notes, 'If a candidate wants to excite people who normally do not vote, reaching past "Meet the Press" is probably not a bad way to start.'

It is therefore unsurprising that politicians court the soft news media. For instance, in a series of pre-9/11 episodes, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* covered the plight of women in autocratic countries. Following the US invasion of Afghanistan in November 2001, President Bush – presumably not coincidentally, and with an eye toward appealing to her vast, and mostly female, audience – asked Oprah Winfrey to be the US special envoy to Afghanistan for women's issues, an honor she declined.

In the run-up to the March 2003 US invasion of Iraq, in turn, the Pentagon granted coveted reporting slots 'embedded' within US combat units to such decidedly apolitical media outlets as MTV, *Rolling Stone*, and *People* magazine. Explaining the Pentagon's rationale for doing so, Bryan G. Whitman, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Media Operations, explained:

It is a recognition that not everyone gets their news from the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal* . . . We consciously looked at those news organizations that have reach and impact and provided them with the greatest possible opportunities . . . Each of them [embedded reporters] reach a different audience. Our goal was to dominate the information market. (Carr, 2003)

This trend is also evident in presidential politics. During the 2000 and 2004 primary and general presidential election campaigns, virtually all candidates appeared on daytime and late-night, entertainment-oriented talk shows. Consequently, many Americans, who might otherwise have largely ignored the presidential campaign, encountered at least *some* information about the candidates. More recently, President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney appeared on the celebrity/entertainment newsmagazine show *The Insider*, suggesting that this genre may also be entering the national political fray.

For future leaders, the changed media environment represents both a challenge and an opportunity. It is a *challenge* because elites cannot count on communicating effectively with the American people solely through speeches or press conferences

broadcast on the major networks or all news cable channels, or through appearances on Sunday morning political talk shows. Failure to reach out to less-politically engaged segments of the public through the soft news media may limit the breadth of popular support for presidential policy initiatives.

For instance, among less-politically informed Americans, but *not* among their better-informed counterparts, consuming daytime talk shows – e.g., Oprah Winfrey and Rosie O'Donnell, both avowed liberal internationalists – reduces support for US involvement in specific military interventions, such as Bosnia, and increases isolationism (Baum, 2003, 2004). The reason is that soft news outlets, such as daytime talk shows, focus on the negative aspects of foreign crises, particularly episodic stories of human drama, including violence, tragedy, and heroism under dangerous circumstances, all of which make the world appear a forbidding place.

Examples include a series of Oprah Winfrey interviews with the families of Americans being held hostage as 'human shields' in Iraq prior to the first Persian Gulf War in 1991, as well as Rosie O'Donnell worrying aloud on live TV about the threat to her family's safety posed by possible domestic terrorism (Baum, 2003). This suggests, ironically, that even as the soft news media raise public awareness of some global problems, they may, depending on how political leaders adapt, have the (presumably) unintended consequence of reducing America's willingness to respond to those problems.

For political leaders, reaching out to the soft news media requires not only repackaging existing political messages into soft news friendly formats, but also emphasizing different aspects of those issues, as well as altogether different *types* of political issues: those most likely to engage the relatively less-politically engaged members of the public. This means more emphasis on body bags – or, more broadly, human-interest themes – and less on geopolitics.

Soft news programs influence which types of political stories capture the nation's attention and become 'water-cooler events' – that is, the topics of conversations around water coolers across the nation (Baum, 2003). Almost two-thirds of respondents in one survey (Pew Center, 1998a) reported that one significant factor in determining which news-oriented programs they watch is whether a given program 'stirs your emotions', while over 70% placed a premium on news that 'is enjoyable and entertaining'.²³

The changed media environment also represents an opportunity for future leaders. The soft news media have opened a window for leaders to capture the attention of a hitherto largely unengaged segment of the population. As noted, these are the very individuals most likely to be persuaded by political messages encountered in a soft news context.

²³ Respondents rated each item on a 5-point scale, running from not important (1) to extremely important (5). The percentages reported in the text refer to items receiving a score of 3 or better (representing moderately to extremely important).

Evidence that America's leaders are seeking to exploit this opportunity is evident in the 2005 controversy over steroid abuse by professional athletes. In the run-up to the 2005 State of the Union address, President Bush presented a major speech outlining an ambitious agenda for space exploration. The issue, however, failed to capture the public's interest, and, presumably not coincidentally, the president made no mention of space exploration in his address. In contrast, steroid abuse *did* capture the public's imagination. Consequently, at the last moment, the president altered a substantial segment of his address to feature the issue. The White House, in turn, had planned to seat California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger next to the first lady during the address. Following the decision to emphasize steroid abuse, they quietly reseated him elsewhere. Why? Schwarzenegger is reputed to have used steroids during his days as a bodybuilding champion.²⁴

The president's focus on steroid abuse paid immediate dividends. The nation's sports media – TV, radio, and print – covered the story intensely. Taking up the president's call to arms, the Congress quickly arranged a series of high-profile hearings on the subject. These hearings, involving some of the nation's most celebrated athletes, generated a feeding frenzy of media coverage. By focusing on steroids, the president reached a vast audience of sports enthusiasts who might otherwise have never heard about his State of the Union address. He also generated considerable post-address attention by continuing to promote the issue, even as his allies in Congress arranged public hearings on the subject; hearings that attracted a nationwide audience thanks to predictable media fascination with the lifestyles (and foibles) of America's rich and famous celebrities, including star athletes.

Soft news and Abu Ghraib

On 16 March 1968, a brigade of American troops entered the Vietnamese village of Mai Lai. Their subsequent slaughter of over 300 unarmed civilians is known as the Mai Lai Massacre. The American public did not learn about the events of 16 March until November 1969, nearly 18 months later, when journalist Seymour Hersh published a story based on conversations with a Vietnam veteran who relayed *his* conversations with eyewitnesses.

Some 25 years later, in January 2004, the US military began investigating another incident involving allegations of extreme cruelty by American soldiers. Like their counterparts at the time of the Mai Lai Massacre, Pentagon officials worried that the incident threatened both the image of the US military, and the ultimate success of its mission. This latter incident involved the abuse of prisoners at the Iraqi prison known as Abu Ghraib. Unlike Mai Lai, however, in 2004 the American public did not remain in the dark for long. Within about three months of the launching of the Pentagon investigation, on 28 April 2004, the CBS newsmagazine show *60 Minutes II* – arguably the 'softest' of the network newsmagazines – broadcast a series of photos of

²⁴ I thank Sam Popkin for suggesting this anecdote.

US soldiers abusing prisoners at Abu Ghraib. In 1968, the military had 18 months to investigate and respond to a major scandal; in 2004 their response time collapsed to just over three months.²⁵

The comparison, however imperfect, between Mail Lai and Abu Ghraib highlights one of the many effects of soft news coverage on public opinion regarding foreign policy, as well as the incentives pushing political leaders to adapt. Yet, the Abu Ghraib scandal also illustrates other related, and also potentially important, trends. In the weeks following the emergence of the scandal, President Bush's approval ratings fell to 41% (CBS News Poll, 20–23 May), the lowest level of his presidency (as of that date). The primary reason was Iraq. At that time, in turn, Abu Ghraib was the primary story emerging from Iraq. In a *Washington Post*/ABC News poll (20–22 May), only one-third of respondents approved of the president's handling of the prisoner abuse issue, a 12-percentage point decline from just two weeks earlier (*Washington Post*/ABC News poll, 5–6 May 2004).

For the better part of a month following their 28 April broadcast by *60 Minutes II*, the shocking images of US soldiers abusing Iraqi detainees, and the resulting scandal, captivated the American public. In one Pew Center poll, less than a week after the first airing of the photos, 76% of respondents claimed to have seen them. In a second poll, conducted by CBS News on 11 May, only 4% of respondents reported *not* following the story. This suggests that many Americans who typically ignore foreign affairs nonetheless followed Abu Ghraib.

Many people doubtless learned about the story from traditional TV or print news outlets. Others presumably did so via the Internet or political talk radio. Yet, millions of Americans avoid political news in nearly all its forms. In one 2002 survey (Pew Center, 2002), about 20% of respondents indicated that they 'hardly ever' or 'never' watch news on the major networks, on cable, or via local TV newscasts. With 96% of the public claiming to have followed the scandal, most of these non-TV news watchers must, by definition, have followed the story. This raises the question of *how* they did so. The answer is that many of them probably learned about the scandal from the soft news media. Between 60 and 70% of the aforementioned non-TV news watchers claimed to watch daytime and late-night talk shows and tabloid newsmagazine shows 'sometimes' or 'regularly.' Many of these latter programs covered the prisoner abuse scandal at length.

Where Americans learn about an event, such as Abu Ghraib, influences their attitudes towards it, particularly given the differences in the typical audiences for soft and hard news outlets. Soft news outlets cover such stories differently than their traditional news counterparts. As noted, their relatively greater emphasis on sensational, episodic stories involving danger, injustice, and violence can make the world appear an inhospitable place. In this case, the soft news media graphically illustrated the

²⁵ I thank Sam Popkin for pointing out the contrast between Mai Lai and Abu Ghraib in passage of time before the public became aware of the respective issues.

horrors of war, most notably through episodic stories of ‘average Americans’ apparently committing acts of torture that most Americans associated with the regime of Saddam Hussein. Such coverage might, more than the relatively more varied and thematic coverage offered by traditional news outlets, increase typical – that is, relatively apolitical and non-ideological – soft news viewers’ skepticism of US involvement in Iraq.

Some preliminary evidence in this regard is available from the aforementioned 20–22 May *Washington Post*/ABC News poll. Respondents without a college degree were far more likely than their college-educated counterparts (44% vs. 28%) to support the proposition that ‘the United States should withdraw its military forces from Iraq in order to avoid further US military casualties, even if that means civil order is not restored there’. Education, in turn, is strongly and positively – though by no means perfectly – correlated with political awareness (Baum, 2003). As also noted, less-educated and less-politically aware individuals form the core audience for the soft news media, but *not* for most traditional news outlets.

The previously cited 5–6 May *Washington Post*/ABC News poll makes it possible to observe trends in public attitudes between early and late May, when the Abu Ghraib scandal unfolded. This allows us to observe the effects of the story on public opinion. Most Americans reacted to these events by downgrading their support for the president’s handling of the scandal. Yet less-educated Americans did so to a substantially greater extent. Among respondents *without* a college degree, *disapproval* of the president’s handling of the prisoner abuse issue rose by 25 percentage points (from 34% to 59%). The corresponding increase among college graduates was smaller: 17 percentage points (from 33% to 50%).²⁶

The prisoner abuse scandal also eroded the American public’s overall support for President Bush’s management of the Iraq conflict. The 5–6 May survey did not address the latter issue. Other polls, however, did so, including a *Washington Post*/ABC News poll conducted on 15–18 April 2004 – nearly two weeks prior to the *60 Minutes II* broadcast of the Abu Ghraib photos – as well as the aforementioned 20–22 May poll. We can therefore compare public support for President Bush’s overall handling of Iraq across surveys conducted *just prior to* and *a month after* the breaking of the story. In the mid-April poll, 51.5% and 55% of college graduates and non-graduates, respectively, *disapproved* of the president’s handling of the situation in Iraq. The corresponding percentages in the 20–22 May poll were 58.5% and 57%, respectively. In other words, among college graduates, disapproval of the president’s management of Iraq rose by only 2 percentage points following revelation of the Abu Ghraib photos. Among *non-college* graduates, the corresponding increase was a much larger 7 percentage points.

This evidence is, of course, circumstantial. We do not know which of these particular survey respondents actually learned about the scandal from soft or hard

²⁶ Because, as of this writing, only *partially* disaggregated data from these surveys are available, percentages for non-college graduates represent an average of the aggregate percentages for respondents with less than a high school education and those with a high school diploma.

news outlets. Yet we do know that less-educated individuals consume lots of soft news, and that these are the very individuals most likely to have downgraded their assessments of President Bush's management of Iraq following the emergence of the Abu Ghraib story. We also know that less-educated and less-politically engaged individuals tend to be most amenable to adjusting their political views on the basis of new information, conditional on receiving it. Hence, this is precisely the pattern we would anticipate *if* less-educated individuals were learning about the scandal from soft news outlets, while their better-educated counterparts were doing so primarily from traditional news sources. Taken together, these data suggest that the core soft news demographic is, at least in significant measure, responsible for the aggregate declines in public support for the US mission in Iraq, and in the president's overall approval ratings, following the emergence of the Abu Ghraib story.

Looking beyond the United States

Neither the proliferation of soft news nor its implications for politics are limited to the United States. As media competition increases, the payoff to media producers from transforming news into entertainment rises. Given the opportunity to consume programming that more closely matches their preferences, many relatively apolitical TV viewers will abandon traditional news in favor of entertainment-oriented programming, including soft news shows. Strategic politicians will inevitably respond by following these relatively persuadable potential voters wherever they go. As a consequence, the nature of political coverage, and with it the nature of politics, changes. Examples of this process abound. For instance, one media critic offered the following observation regarding trends in Japanese newspapers:

Newspaper readership is not growing in Japan. Many younger people don't read them. And the competition in the newsstands is much bigger than before. The Asahi and the Yomiuri formerly did not print so-called soft news on their front pages but now they do, and criminal news coverage has also grown much larger since the early 1990s. To increase profits they feel they have to be more sensational.²⁷

A similar pattern is evident in Japanese television. The proliferation of sensationalized, entertainment/gossip oriented daytime TV talk shows in Japan – known as 'wide shows' – is a case in point. Another Japanese media critic characterizes the effects of these shows on Japanese politics as follows:

[T]hese talk shows dumb every issue down. . . In order to gain public sympathy, the shows have to exaggerate using short phrases liberally sprinkled with the kind of emotional spice that arouses feelings such as joy, anger, indignation, and envy. Politics has gone from being a forum for proper debate to being the

²⁷ Interview with Asano Kenichi, professor of journalism at Doshisha University and former Kyodo News Service correspondent.

scene of a ‘battle of the sound bites’ in which participants hurl emotional and catchy slogans at each other. (*Japan Today* 2004)²⁸

Notwithstanding this characterization, wide shows do cover politics, sometimes in great depth. In 1995, wide shows devoted nearly 310 hours to covering the Aum Shinrikyo terrorist group (Penn, 2003). Penn (2003: 156) reports that, in recent years, wide shows ‘have devoted a great deal of their time to advice on how to survive the economic hard times and instruction on the changing politics of the Korean peninsula’.

Like their American counterparts, Japanese politicians are reaching out to wide show audiences. For instance, former Japanese Minister of Foreign Affairs Makiko Tanaka – daughter of former Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka – has built her considerable political constituency in significant measure through repeated appearances on such shows (*Japan Today*, 2004).²⁹

Elsewhere, in March 2005, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, facing lagging popularity in the aftermath of the Iraq war, appeared on a UK entertainment-oriented daytime talk show – ‘The Wright Stuff’ – to try to restore confidence in his leadership among the show’s primarily female audience members. Over the next several days, the British tabloid press published a series of photos of various female audience members kissing Blair. Following his subsequent narrow re-election victory, Blair continued to court soft news audiences. For instance, in the days leading up to a July 2005 G8 summit meeting he chaired, Prime Minister Blair appeared on MTV, alongside activist pop star Bob Geldof, to discuss prominent issues on the G8 agenda, including global climate change and debt relief to Africa (Brown, 2005).

Similar trends have reached the Middle East as well. In Qatar, the Arabic satellite news network Al Jazeera reportedly features increasing numbers of sensationalized talk shows, modeled after Larry King and Oprah Winfrey (Transnational Broadcasting Studies, 2004). This comes at a time when the station is seeking to break its ties with the Qatari government, in favor of a market-based financing model.

In Saudi Arabia, in turn, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* – broadcast into Saudi Arabia via Dubai-based satellite TV station MBC4 – whose self-described ‘core audience’ is 18- to 25-year old females – is the nation’s highest-rated English-language TV program. The show, which is particularly popular among young Saudi women, provoked a firestorm of criticism in Saudi Arabia for an episode entitled ‘Women Across the Globe’ in which Winfrey interviewed a Saudi woman who was nearly beaten to death by her husband. According to Hana Balaa, director of the TNS Female Research Center in Saudi Arabia, the popularity of *Oprah* is part of a growing trend in the region in which, due in significant measure to the availability of satellite TV channels, ‘[W]omen are

²⁸ Quote from Takashi Tachibana first appeared in the May 2004 issue of *Bungei Shunju*.

²⁹ See Krauss (1998) for a discussion of how rising competition in Japan’s TV industry, beginning in the 1980s, led to a greater emphasis on the entertainment value of news, including more coverage of soft news themes, such as crime, as well as more critical, ‘opinionated’ reporting. According to Krauss, newer TV stations, such as Fuji, TBS, and NTV, place greater emphasis on soft news topics and themes than their more traditional counterparts, NHK and Asahi.

increasingly seeking ways to express themselves and their individuality ... They're expressing their opinions more' (El-Rashidi, 2005).

Conclusion

Democratic politics consists of a strategic interaction between those seeking to lead and those deciding who ought to be their leaders. In order to make such decisions, democratic citizens seek to determine which candidates will best represent them, while expending the minimum necessary amount of time and effort in the process (Popkin, 1993). In an era of *mass* democratic politics, in which virtually all democracies empower many millions of citizens to elect their leaders, the mass media are the primary, indeed frequently the *exclusive*, intermediaries between those seeking to lead, and those deciding whom to follow. How the mass media cover the process of selecting and evaluating leadership candidates thus affects both parties to this strategic interaction.

The soft news media have changed the nature and extent of political information consumed by those individuals who are most persuadable: the least-politically attentive members of the public. Strategic politicians have responded by altering both the content of and delivery vehicles for their messages. Consequently, the very nature of politics in America is changing. Soft news coverage of politics is becoming mainstream. Political fortunes are increasingly won and lost on the basis of scandal, celebrity, heroism, and morality – the very essence of the soft news media's framing of politics.

While these trends emerged first, and are thus most advanced, in the United States, the same processes are emerging in free market societies around the world. For better or worse – and clearly many communication scholars (e.g., Patterson, 2003; Bennett, L. 2003; Bennett, S.E. n.d.; Prior, 2003) are skeptical that these media trends will be for the better – as the media in increasing numbers of nations adopt the US free market model, the blending of entertainment and politics will continue to proliferate. This proliferation is changing the playing field upon which democratic politics are contested.

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