

## A Generational Shift

It was a great national contest that will be immediately recognizable to you. Two men were vying for one prize. Although tens of millions of ballots were cast, the margin separating the two was less than 1 percent of the total. The announcer ticked off the state-by-state tallies as the two candidates, both Southerners, watched closely. One candidate had won Ohio and New York. The other had won a great bounty: Florida. As the night wore on, reporters came to us live from massive placard-waving rallies in the candidates' hometowns. Minutes later, the network was ready to make its announcement, one that would answer the question on the minds of millions.

Let's keep the announcement on hold for a few seconds. Although no one should be reduced to a demographic, if you are above the age of 40, chances are excellent that you recognize the above scenario as belonging to the contest between George W. Bush and Al Gore. If you are younger than 40, however, you might very well be thinking about an entirely different contest. For you, the denouement of the above contest may have come in the form of an announcement by the Fox network's Ryan Seacrest: "The winner of American Idol 2003 is Ruben Studdard."<sup>1</sup>

The similarities between *American Idol*, a "reality" talent show in which audience members vote for the best singers, and the contest involving Bush and Gore are fun to note: the close vote, the state-by-state tallies, the rallies in Southern hometowns, and even a vote tally dispute about the margin of victory.<sup>2</sup> We Americans have always been good at entertaining ourselves and

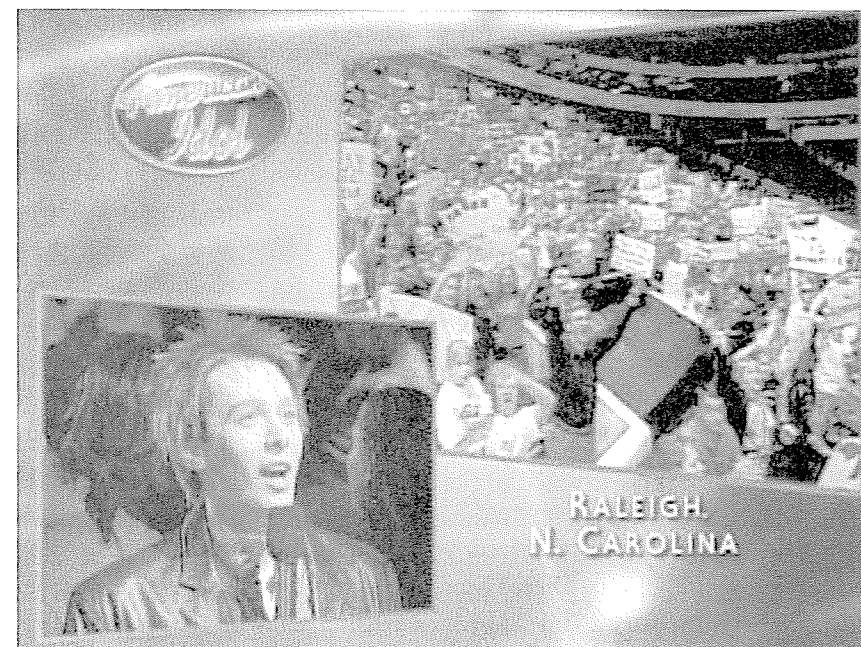
if the numbers are to be believed, up to 40 million people tuned in to watch the *American Idol* finale in May 2003.<sup>3</sup> There's nothing wrong with a little low-calorie escapism.

But if we go further in the comparison between *American Idol* and Bush-Gore, the picture is less amusing. Forty million people watched *American Idol*'s conclusion, but only 37 million watched the second debate between Bush and Gore. When we consider young people separately, this gap is widened. The debates drew a much older crowd, with a lot of young Americans tuning out.<sup>4</sup> America's younger citizens were far less invested in the presidential debates and far more invested in *American Idol*. Twenty-four million votes were cast, mainly by young people, for contestants Ruben Studdard or Clay Aiken. Although some of these votes were by minors, somewhat limiting a comparison here—it is nevertheless sobering to remember that only 4 million (16.6%) of 18 to 24-year-olds voted in the 1998 midterm elections. The placard-waving rallies of the *American Idol* show were filled with exuberant young people, clapping and yelling enthusiastically. Even civic groups came out: "YMCA for Clay," read one sign in a rally for Clay Aiken in Raleigh, North Carolina. The "reporter" for Fox said there were "8,700 screaming fans" at the rally. This show of civic pride and organization is in direct contrast to the national trend, especially among young people, of declining civic involvement and declining political enthusiasm.

And then there was the general knowledge about the "candidates." While many *American Idol* fans could name all of the top ten contestants, few young people even knew the names of more than one or two of the presidential primary candidates in 2000 and fewer still knew the issues. In 2000, one poll asked which presidential primary candidate was the sponsor of campaign finance reform in congress. Only 4 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds knew it was John McCain.<sup>5</sup> And while most young people seemed to know the names of the judges of *American Idol*—Simon Cowell, Paula Abdul, and Randy Jackson—few knew the names of any of the Supreme Court justices who decided the election for Bush in 2000.<sup>\*</sup>

This brings us to the thesis of this book, that across America, young people have abandoned traditional news. By "traditional" I mean the general interest and political news you get from newspapers, magazines, television, and

<sup>\*</sup>A poll found that three times as many Americans could name three of the Three Stooges (59%) as could name three of the nine Supreme Court justices (17%). As you will see, the rate among young people who knew Supreme Court justices may be substantially lower. Joan Biskupic, "Has the Court Lost Its Appeal? In Poll, 59% Can Name 3 'Stooges,' 17% Can Name 3 Justices," *Washington Post*, 12 October 1995.



A hometown rally for American Idol "candidate" Clay Aiken, May 21, 2003. Reproduced by permission of Fremantle Media North America/19 Television.

the Web. Older Americans are still reading newspapers and have been doing it all their lives. But the generational shift is severe: While more than 70 percent of older Americans read a newspaper every day, a habit they picked up in their youth, less than 20 percent of young Americans do so now.<sup>6</sup> Further, data show that the newspaper habit is not one that increases much with age. That is, you typically pick up the habit in your twenties, or you never do. It used to be that most 25-year-olds, and certainly 35-year-olds, followed the news. But for the past few decades, most have not. Eighty percent of young people don't read the newspaper today, and there is no evidence that they will read 20 years from now, either.

It would be less troubling if the 80 percent of young people who do not read newspapers every day watched TV news or logged on to news Web sites. Most don't. The average viewer age of prime-time entertainment is 42-years-old, which is, as one would expect, roughly the median age of the population as a whole. At CNN, which recently changed its format to attract younger viewers, the average age ranges from 59 to 64.<sup>7</sup> At the broadcast networks, the median viewer age for the evening news has been climbing steadily—from the low 50s in 1991 to 60 today.<sup>8</sup> As Dan Rather ages, so do his viewers; the ads during his show hawk denture cleaners, arthritis medicine, Viagra, and De-

pend. And because young people are not watching, they are not courted. As MTV's Tabitha Soren once said, "It's a Catch-22. Why cover them if they don't watch you? But why should they watch you if you don't cover them?"<sup>9</sup> Unless something breaks this cycle, the death of aging news consumers will mark a profound change in the social and political landscape of America's future.

It would be easy to dismiss the decline in newspaper readership and television news viewership among young people by saying that they get their news, somehow, via the Internet and other sources. As I will show later, however, most young people use the Internet for everything *but* news. That the Internet has not closed the news gap between young and old is apparent: While young Americans in past decades knew as much as their elders on a range of topics, this is no longer the case.<sup>10</sup> Studies over the last decade have found that Americans over 50 are nearly twice as likely to follow particular domestic and political news stories as those under 30.<sup>11</sup>

Across the news industry, executives fret over the future of news and its declining audience. But the United States is facing a crisis that extends far beyond the news industry. While math and reading skills of young Americans remain relatively stable, their average political awareness has become remarkably shallow. While the Internet has allowed many to develop expertise in their own narrow interests, fewer are willing or able to develop a generalist's gaze. Knowledge of sports and celebrities continues to rise, but local and national political literacy has plummeted.

What are the political, journalistic, and social consequences of a new generation of young Americans with little interest in traditional news? The existing answers have been less than revealing. The newspaper industry sees the problem in terms of consumers, not citizens, and is at sea as to how to recapture market share.<sup>12</sup> Some conservative critics of education point to the failures of liberal education, particularly multiculturalism.<sup>13</sup> But these conservatives, led by William Bennett, offer little beyond "values," cultural literacy, and other generalities.<sup>14</sup> No one has clarified the crisis, much less proposed solutions to it. Through research, analysis, and interviews with journalists and young adults, this book charts the consequences of and proposes solutions to the decline of news in America.

A recent poll showed that 75 percent of young people trusted that the U.S. military would do "the right thing," up from around 20 percent in 1975. At the same time, trust in the media has declined to 36 percent from a high of 54 percent in 1989.<sup>15</sup> While trust in the government has its place—and a certain amount is necessary—how can we hold our leaders accountable when we don't trust the watchdogs? We can accept faith when it is informed by

facts. We can accept *American Idol* if it doesn't totally eclipse news knowledge. But America is facing the greatest exodus of informed citizenship in its history.

## Not the Sole Fault of "Media" or Young People

Although I will outline how the rise of certain media, especially entertainment on television, correlates with a decline in news consumption, this book is not a diatribe against the media, in part because history tells us that those who have attacked the media have often been wrong. For example, Socrates said that introducing writing into the academy would allow students to "merely appear to be wise instead of really being so."<sup>16</sup> Socrates advocated for a purely oral culture, even as Plato set down Socrates' words for eternity. But the otherwise great Socrates failed to understand the many benefits of writing to the arts and sciences and he was plainly wrong; this book tries to avoid similar statements about other media systems.

Nor does this book blame young people for the problems outlined herein. As I will show, the decline in news consumption began in the 1960s as the first generation born with television was coming of age. In other words, the 20-year-olds of today are not the first to abandon the news; it was their parents. Nor does this book wax nostalgic for a rosy and informed past: In the 1950s and 1960s, at the height of the Cold War, a poll revealed that only 55 percent of Americans knew that East Germany was a communist country. Less than half knew that the Soviet Union was not part of NATO.<sup>17</sup> I do not find students to be less thoughtful or literate than they have ever been. When I told a senior professor at a large university about this project, he said the decline in news consumption was because the kids of today are illiterate and in a near-vegetative state. "I'm tired of watering the vegetables every day," he told me as he was getting ready to retire. This view couldn't be farther from my own. I am constantly impressed with the thoughtfulness and intelligence of young people. And while SAT scores have declined a bit in the last 40 years, elements of literacy are most certainly on an upswing as more young Americans begin to replace televisions and telephones with reading and typing on the Internet.<sup>18</sup>

## Why

Why have most younger Americans stopped following the news? This, and what to do about the problem, are the central issues of the book. As in any good murder mystery, there are many shady and questionable suspects, each with leaky alibis that may or may not add up.

## Complacency

On September 11, 2001, planes struck the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Within minutes, millions of Americans were watching television, listening to the radio, and logging on to the Internet for news. I went to a classroom and watched with 30 college students as the Pentagon was struck and each Trade Center tower collapsed. The day certainly made clear that young people (and old people, too) will care deeply about some forms of news. Every student in that classroom confronted a grim spectacle: a horrific loss of life; an unfolding national disaster of unknown proportions; the destruction, in real time, of two of the world's tallest buildings; and an attack on the greatest symbol of American military power. After watching the news unfold, hour after hour, I started to question the thesis of this book. Almost on cue, however, a female student leaned over to me and asked, "Who is this Osama bin Laden they keep talking about?" During a news report about the president's movements, she asked, "If something happens to Bush, who becomes president?" Within a month after the terror attacks, radio stations that cater to younger listeners were reporting that ratings had returned to normal. And the gains for broadcast and cable news were short-lived and modest.<sup>19</sup>

E. J. Dionne, Jr., in *Why Americans Hate Politics*, lamented the lack of intelligent political conversation among politicians and among the public. Viewing the debate over the 1991 Gulf War as a rare exception, Dionne asked, "Does it take a war to make us take politics seriously?"<sup>20</sup> Do Americans avoid the news because they feel it doesn't matter? Are we complacent, because as Jefferson said, we are blessed with a large and fertile land, separated by two great oceans, insulated from Europe's "exterminating havoc"?<sup>21</sup> Is it because we are suffering from, in the words of one writer, "hapathy," a combination of happiness and apathy?<sup>22</sup> That would certainly explain why, despite having one of the freest presses in the world, that most Americans cannot name their own congressional representative.<sup>23</sup> The problem with this theory is that the people who have the most reason to be complacent—wealthy, white, educated older men—are the very people who generally consume the most news.<sup>24</sup> In other words, if the comfort that America provides makes people turn off news, why do those who are the most comfortable in America consume the most news?

Perhaps the answer is not complacency but a perceived isolation from the political process. Many of the young nonreaders of news I have spoken with believe that the political process is both morally bankrupt and completely insulated from public pressure. Perhaps political news is only relevant to people who still believe that the political structure is responsive. Thus it may be less the complacency of affluence than the doldrums of despondency that cause citizens to abandon news.

## Trust

There has been a steady decline in the public's trust of the media. And there is evidence that this distrust extends to both entertainment and news. Can you blame Americans for not appreciating a distinction? When Disney acquires ABC News and then tells it that bad reports about the parent company are off-limits, when CBS News kills a solid story about big tobacco only days before its own corporate merger, when the *Los Angeles Times* breaks down the inviolate wall between business and editorial, Americans are right to lose respect for the journalistic enterprise. A student of mine once began a sentence: "Journalists like David Letterman . . ." I cringed, but the blame goes at least in part to the corporate forces that weaken the news media's distinct mission.

And yet, good journalism is still practiced every day in the United States and around the world. Despite common complaints among polled nonnews consumers that newspapers are not global enough, not local enough, not relevant enough, and not political enough,<sup>25</sup> a half hour with the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, or *Wall Street Journal* belies this sentiment, giving a generalist's view of pressing and important news. With intelligent and aggressive reporters stationed at the gates of power around the country and around the world, these newspapers and others like them report, verify, and interpret a wide range of news. Further, they do so in a way that stands apart from political parties. For example, despite critics on the right calling it leftwing, the *New York Times* was consistently critical of Clinton's administration. And the *Times* is eclectic in its editorial page endorsements of Democrats and Republicans. In 2002, for example, it supported the Republican candidate for governor of New York, George Pataki, over his Democratic rival.<sup>26</sup> The same can be true of the *Wall Street Journal*, which leans right on its editorial page but was nonetheless highly critical of the rightwing president George W. Bush. Hearing a perspective apart from the binary partisan options is crucial during times of crisis and change: Watergate, Vietnam, Iran-Contra, the breakup of the Soviet empire, the Gulf War, the widening gap between rich and poor in the 1990s, the impeachment of Clinton, the contested presidential election of 2000, and the aftermath of the September 11 terror attacks. Understanding how the government works and how to hold it accountable are essential ingredients in any democracy. Although citizens should be skeptical consumers of news, to reject all news means to reject the underpinnings of democracy.

## The Decline of Social Capital

Robert D. Putnam's 2000 book, *Bowling Alone*, charted the decay of what the author called "social capital," the important resource of public and quasi-public dialogue. For example, Putnam discovered that more people bowl than

ever before, but fewer bowl in leagues; hence, the title of his book. But bowling is just the start. The last half century has seen a decline in membership in unions, Elks clubs, and PTAs; fewer people give dinner parties, speak in public, go to church, and attend the theater. The list goes on and on, encompassing the whole range of civic activity. Although city dwellers and suburbanites are most affected, even residents of traditionally high civic areas, like the rural parts of my own state, Vermont, have been hit hard. Putnam convincingly demonstrated a correlation between the lack of social capital and news consumption. The same people who join groups and write their representatives also read newspapers. The same people who have trust in the system, and their ability to change it, use the news for ammunition. The same people who distrust each other, drop out of society, and become isolated, find news irrelevant to their lives.

The problem with Putnam's work in this area is that it establishes correlation but not causality. In other words, we do not know whether dropping out of the once-fertile social fabric of society pushes us to abandon news or if the reverse is true. For an analysis of this, we would need to move beyond the data and actually interview young people. This is an aim of this book.

#### Television, Radio, Air-Conditioning, and Indoor Plumbing

As Putnam and others have shown, the decline of civic involvement runs parallel to the rise of television. Television reached a saturation point in the early 1950s. Soon after, news consumption began its steady decline. Putnam shows a close correlation between those who avoid television with those who have worked on a community project.<sup>27</sup> As it turns out, TV watching, particularly entertainment TV, correlates negatively with news consumption. And as the most time-consuming activity apart from work and sleep, TV watching has an enormous impact on leisure time; the average household's TV viewing per day went from four and a half hours in 1950 to six hours in 1975 to more than seven today.<sup>28</sup>

But as a suspect, television has an alibi. Long before TV, radio, too, had given people an excuse to stay home. The rise of radio music, for example, coincided with the decline of piano lessons and sheet music distribution. Other technologies affected communities, too. The rise of air-conditioning in the 1940s and 1950s made the living room more comfortable than the stoop or porch or rooftop. In communities across the United States, indoor plumbing and electricity have allowed us to stay at home, to avoid the local community, to feel less connected with the news. Although these trends accelerated during the age of television, they preceded it. The initial wound to news was inflicted before television entered the room.

#### Suburbia

The decline of news also parallels the rise of the suburbs. Why is that so? Perhaps it is the longer commute, typically by car, making reading the paper more difficult. That fact alone could explain the rise of talk radio in the last decades. But that doesn't explain why fewer people read in the New York City subway system. And it doesn't explain another often overlooked fact: While many older commuters listen to news and talk shows in their cars, younger ones increasingly listen to music instead.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps it has less to do with the commute than the unsubstantial community that the suburbs afford. As Lewis Mumford once remarked, "suburbia is a collective effort to lead a private life."<sup>30</sup>

And here we may have come to a common thread in all the suspects. At the end of one Agatha Christie novel (I'll give away the ending, but not the book), detective Poirot discovers that *everyone* did it. Perhaps the common means of assassination by all of the above suspects is that each of the accused attacked not only news, but community, too.

#### Imagined Communities

Once upon a time, there was an island in the Pacific on which Europeans from three countries lived and worked as friends. It was 1914, and British, French, and German nationals enjoyed their isolation on the island, far from telegraph lines and newsboys. News from Europe would come to the island only intermittently, by ship, in the form of letters, books, and great packages of old newspapers, aged by time and the salty dampness of the journey. One day, a ship brought the news, six weeks old, that Europe was now riven by a Great War. The islanders, who had bonded in their common European heritage, now learned that Germany was the foe of France and Britain. The islanders were now enemies. Moreover, unbeknownst to them, they had been *de jure* enemies for six weeks. This anecdote comes from Walter Lippmann,<sup>31</sup> who used it to discuss the lag between us and events. But the above is also a great illustration of how our allegiances are shaped by both our immediate surroundings and by our media messages. Further, our allegiances shape our sense of community and our place in it.

Study your own allegiances. You may be an American, a Minnesotan, a Mormon, a Yankee fan, or a Democrat. What these categories have in common is that they are all, in some way, a cognitive construction. As Benedict Anderson wrote in his book, *Imagined Communities* (1992), a large community is an imagined one:

It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in



the minds of each lives the image of their communion. . . . In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined.<sup>32</sup>

The lure of an imagined community can be profound. Mitchell Stephens, in *A History of News* (1997), argues that one of the reasons Alexander the Great's kingdom fell quickly after his death was his failure to create a news community to span the empire; instead of creating a cohesive empire, Alexander's heirs set up their own fiefdoms. A few centuries later, Stephens wrote, Rome strengthened its own union by connecting its citizens with news. That all roads led to Rome (and from Rome) meant that news could unite an otherwise disparate people. When Cicero went to Cilicia (Turkey) in 51 B.C. as a proconsul, he grew homesick and repeatedly asked for more news. And while he claimed a preference for senatorial news and a distaste for trifles ("burglaries," "the adjournment of trials," and "gladiatorial pairings"), presumably all types of news helped to keep him from going native because they helped him to imagine himself as a Roman.<sup>33</sup> Stephens speculates that without these connections, Cicero might "have grown more interested in affairs in Cilicia, where his power and prerogatives were so much greater[.]" Unlike Alexander's officers, Stephens wrote, Roman governors "eventually began marching back to—or on—Rome."<sup>34</sup>

If the inhabitants of Lippmann's Pacific island had lived in the satellite age, they could have seen Archduke Ferdinand assassinated, live, on television. Rather than six weeks, it could have taken less than a second for the news of the war to arrive via satellite; within seconds, the German residents of the island could have adjusted their feelings about their French and British neighbors, and vice versa. The presence of modern news systems on Lippmann's island would have quickly altered the imagined community.

### Absence of News in Imagined Communities

But the absence of all news would have a profound effect on Lippmann's island, too. Imagine the state of the island if no news at all had leaked in. Slowly but surely the Europeans, or perhaps their children, would have formed alliances or factions based not on pedigree but on proximity and politics. This sloughing of past ties happens all the time. A Republican Party club meeting in Chicago today might involve people of French, British, and German origin, but they would be united by a shared geographic location and a common worldview, based in part on their consumption and interpretation of general news. News can unite people in powerful ways and create powerful imaginary com-

munities. It happened for a short time after September 11, 2001, when a common "American" identity seemed to seduce even the most cynical of citizens.

What would our world look like in the absence of general news? Let's say we are all islands, each man and woman a separate news entity. Let's say we are each interested in news that interests us, consuming not general news, but a type of publication Nicholas Negroponte called "The Daily Me."<sup>35</sup> People have always mixed general news sources (*Time* magazine, for example) with sources that cater to a more specialized interest (think *Golf Digest*, the Food Network, or *Women's Wear Daily*). But let's say the balance between general and specialized news became skewed. How would a media system based on the individual's needs alter what Jürgen Habermas called "the public sphere," that place between the civic society and the State where people come together to constitute themselves as a public?<sup>36</sup> As it turns out, people who choose entertainment over news are less likely to participate in community projects. They are also far more likely to "give the finger" to another driver. And there is evidence that materialism is on the rise as civic involvement declines.<sup>37</sup>

What is the shape of a public sphere driven by private concerns? One doesn't need to use one's imagination to find the consequences. In 1991, the editors and writers of the *Columbus* (Georgia) *Ledger-Enquirer* planned, wrote, and published a series of reports about the city's most important long-term problems. They offered a detailed account of what experts proposed to do about them. The series was cogent, well written, hard-hitting, and intelligent. It was printed. But nothing happened. In other words, the newspaper's good journalism was faced with a growing problem—a journalist's equivalent of throwing a party and having no one show up. The newspaper then tried to create a viable public by holding its own meetings and forums. Some media experts, the most thoughtful of whom is Jay Rosen, have argued that this medicine, now called "public journalism," is less dangerous than the malady of civic illness.<sup>38</sup> But this is strong medicine indeed.

In late 2001, a poll by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press found that only 19 percent of Americans correctly understood that the United States ran a budget surplus in the last years of Bill Clinton's administration and in the first year of George W. Bush's. Later, in 2003, when Democratic and Republican lawmakers debated the feasibility and desirability of tax cuts (skewed heavily toward the wealthy), government spending, and an expensive military action in Iraq; they did so with an eye to the 2004 general elections. If 81 percent of the American public did not even have a basic outline of their economy, how could the public be a useful guide? If the political parties make mistakes, how will this kind of electorate hold them accountable on election day?

The answer is that, increasingly, they do not. The electorate is uninformed and fragmented, with less opportunity to inform one another. Family dinners in the 1940s became TV dinners in the 1970s. And increasingly, the many TV screens in the home provide a separate rhythm for isolated meals: In 1970, 6 percent of all sixth graders had TVs in their rooms; today 77 percent do.<sup>39</sup> And everyone's watching something different: In 1975, around half of all Americans watched network news every night; today only a quarter of us do.<sup>40</sup> We have become more balkanized and apolitical and our water cooler conversations increasingly revolve around our narrowly defined selves. Our citizens are uninformed about general news and deprived of the means to discuss their opinions of it with friends, family, and coworkers.

## Book Outline

### Chapter 2: How Tuned Out Are They?

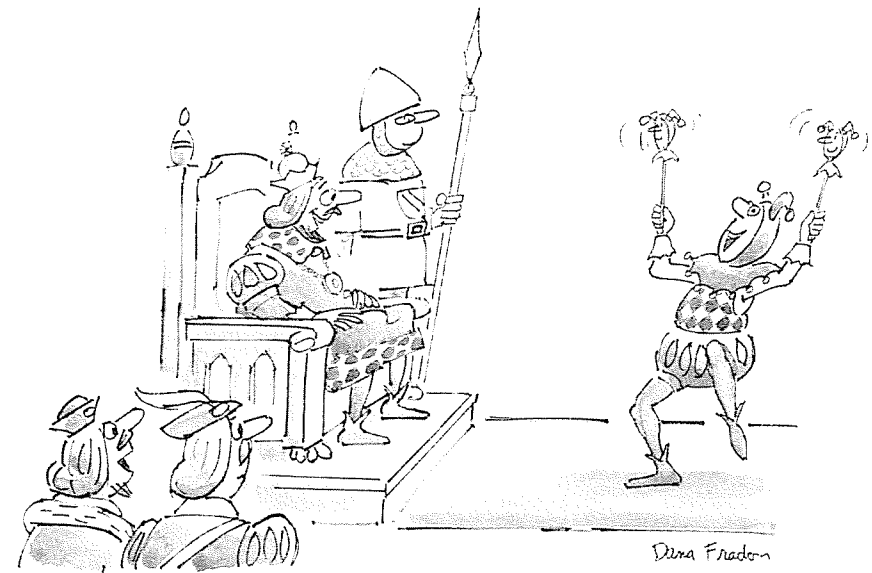
We must guard against nostalgia. There was never a time in American history when every voter paid attention. We must also acknowledge that while most young Americans are tuned out, older Americans are not exactly tuned in: In January 2000, during the presidential primaries, only a fraction of Americans of any age could identify more than one candidate in each party among the crowded race. Nevertheless, the polling data and anecdotal reports are unequivocal: When young people are asked about current events, particularly political affairs, they are *far* less likely to know the facts than their elders are—and further, young people are far less likely to care about their lack of knowledge. This runs alongside a declining interest among young people in the consumption of the various news media, from newspapers to radio to television. While the Internet remains the exception to this general decline, even this medium has failed to close the gap between generations. I have analyzed data from the General Social Survey, a massive database of social habits put out by Roper; polls from the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press; and other data which Robert Putnam and other researchers of this trend have used. Chapter 2, by using polling data and other broad measures, shows the depth of the generational divide.

### Chapters 3 and 4: Talking with Young People

In trying to determine how people use the Internet, Dhavan Shah suggested that scholars “check what individuals do with this new medium, not simply what it does to them.”<sup>41</sup> This is the aim of chapters 3 and 4—to discover, through interviews with young people, the nature of their news consumption

or lack thereof. I have interviewed young people who are politically active, and college students of all political stripes. I have visited Brandeis University to investigate news habits of students in a program that provides them with free newspapers. I have also analyzed the news habits of college students in Boston, Burlington, and Los Angeles; bankers in Kansas City; and actors in Los Angeles. Finally, I have spoken with the youngest of news consumers, 10- to 18-years-old, in areas as diverse as New Orleans and Colchester, Vermont, to get an idea of how they have come of age with the new computer medium. At the start of the nineteenth century, de Tocqueville was the first to travel around America to chronicle its robust journalism and civic life. At the start of the twenty-first century, I have embarked on a similar (but admittedly much more modest) exploration of the dearth of this kind of engagement. In this journey, I have discovered not only what kind of information young people avoid, but also what they embrace. It will be these issues that will shape America for generations to come.

With the possible exception of diarists, nearly all writers write for an audience. The extent to which they pander to their audience's tastes is one of the things that defines their style. Chapter 3 explores this continuum, looking at the desire to inform against the desire to entertain. Through an exploration of



“Didn't this use to be the time slot for his news briefings?”

the past and present forces driving the media markets in the United States, we can see a marked shift away from journalism that fills the public's needs to one that fills its desires. In 1983, Tom Brokaw only had Dan Rather and Peter Jennings to compete with. In his words, he "didn't have to worry about people going 'click.'"<sup>42</sup> Brokaw's successor, Brian Williams, will contend with CNN, Fox News, MTV, ESPN, the Cartoon Network, the Playboy Channel, the Food Network, Rush Limbaugh, and Nakednews.com, among others. Chapter 3 explores what the entertainment does to young people.

Chapter 4 continues the discussion with young people by evaluating their news habits. To what extent are the media choices of young people influenced by workplace demands, conversational norms, childhood education, and new technology? Young people themselves provide some of the best answers.

#### Chapter 5: Television, the Internet, and the Eclipse of the Local

The world is much smaller now. In 1930, a phone call from the United States to London cost \$300 in today's dollars; today, we can "chat" for free over the Internet with Australian Christians and Iranian Shiites. Indeed, we can even find Australian Shiites and Iranian Christians. As Thomas Friedman reminds us, the Berlin Wall fell not just in Berlin, but everywhere. The world's old metaphor, the Wall, has been replaced by a newer one—the Web.<sup>43</sup> Satellites let us view, in a flash, the world's most beautiful women, the world's biggest floods, the world's strangest sights.

But what does the faraway signal do to the nearby? As Mitchell Stephens has said, we are increasingly more likely to know what the president had for dinner last night and increasingly less likely to learn why the ambulance pulled in to the house down the street.<sup>44</sup> The distant can usurp the nearby.

Chapter 5 looks at how the national and international entertainment systems affect community. Here we are informed by Thomas Bender's distinction, borrowed from a German scholar, between community and society. In a community, people "remain essentially united in spite of all separating factors," whereas in society "they are essentially separated in spite of all uniting factors."<sup>45</sup> What are the local political consequences to a community bewitched by TV and the 'Net? If we accept Lewis Friedland's assertion that "place . . . not technology, is the critical element in civic and democratic participation,"<sup>46</sup> what does America look like when the local community is so compromised? Finally, some scholars have argued that Internet communities, with their "low barriers"<sup>47</sup> to entry and exit, discourage accommodation and compromise, necessary in any bricks-and-mortar community. How well do virtual communities serve as a model for the long-term commitment of information and perspiration required of palpable democracies?

Chapter 6: The Decline of General News and the Deliberative Body  
Journalism's primary goals may be information, verification, and analysis,<sup>48</sup> but its most important by-product may be democracy itself. One of the ways journalism promotes democracy is by engendering an awareness of shared interests. If a citizen understands his or her thread in society's fabric, that citizen will be more likely to see common goals and understand the need for reciprocity, a notion reflected in Yogi Berra's famous phrase, "If you don't go to somebody's funeral, they won't come to yours."

But journalists can only promote democracy and reciprocity if their rights to know and report are supported in the courts: the state courts, the federal courts, and the court of public opinion. Against the tenuous right to know come competing forces. As cable TV and the Internet provide more opportunities to pursue personalized paths, we see the promotion of another potent right, the right of individual choice. As John Perry Barlow wrote in his *Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace* (1999), "leave us alone."<sup>49</sup> The right to privacy goes back at least to Louis D. Brandeis's famous Supreme Court dissent of 1928 in which he coined the phrase, "the right to be let alone."<sup>50</sup> The tension between the right to know and the right to privacy is a useful one in any democracy; the problem emerges when one side overpowers the other. This happened at the height of "yellow journalism" in the 1890s when Brandeis first began to write about the subject, defining (some would say "inventing") the constitutional right to privacy.<sup>51</sup>

At the start of the twenty-first century, the cornucopia of cable and the Internet tilts the balance the other way, making the right to inform far more difficult: What does democracy look like when its information is self-selected? John Dewey once wrote, "no man and no mind was ever emancipated merely by being left alone."<sup>52</sup> Quoting this line from Dewey, Cass Sunstein worried about the consequences of the "Daily Me" to democracy.<sup>53</sup>

The fragmentation is easy to see in television in general and TV news in particular. The most popular TV show of 1960s, *I Love Lucy*, garnered two-thirds of all viewers. The most popular show of the 1970s, *All in the Family*, was watched by half of all viewers. By the 1990s, *Seinfeld's* share was only one-third. The fragmentation in news is even more precipitous; rarely do we gather around the television for news, September 11 notwithstanding. After watching Walter Cronkite's carefully worded conclusion in 1968 that the United States was "mired in stalemate" in Vietnam, President Johnson grew despondent. "If I've lost Cronkite," Johnson reasoned, "I've lost middle America."<sup>54</sup> Can any one journalist today command such a following? September 11 notwithstanding, our nation is unified not by a common attention to news, but by our inattention to it.



In one section of *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman sings an embrace of all Americans, of deacons and drovers, prostitutes and presidents.<sup>55</sup> In a nonlinear world, we can click on the presidents and deacons and leave out the rest. Or perhaps we're only interested in prostitutes. Through self-selection, we can build an impressive expertise in one narrow area, but building a well-rounded, generalist's gaze is less likely. What do we miss when we self-select? Sunstein argued that self-selection minimizes one's opportunities to encounter unexpected ideas and unpopular opinions, a necessary ingredient in any democracy.

Here's one example from history: In the 1890s, nearly every white person in the United States believed that blacks were lynched in the South because they raped white women. Ida B. Wells, an anti-lynching crusader, presented clear evidence that (1) despite the *belief* that most lynchings were a response to blacks raping whites, the fact was that rape was not even the stated cause in most cases; (2) black victims were often charged with rape only *after* the lynchings became public; and (3) charges of "rape" were often cases involving a black man and a white woman caught in a consensual relationship. Although these facts took more than a decade to reach progressives and more than two decades to persuade the general public, they eventually changed Americans' perceptions; journalists, despite their prejudices, began to understand the force of the facts and presented them to the public.<sup>56</sup> Imagine how much longer it would have taken to convince dubious whites if they had gotten their lynching news from Web sites only reporting the "lawlessness" of Southern blacks. Chapter 6 takes the arguments of Sunstein and others and puts them in a historical and then contemporary frame. The arguments about the implications of self-selection are not theoretical: Chapter 6, through interviews and research of news habits, analyzes current practices and how news consumers who self-select function as citizens.

#### Conclusion: How to Tune Back in

"The role of the press," wrote James W. Carey, "is simply to make sure that in the short run we don't get screwed and it does this best not by treating us as consumers of news, but by encouraging the conditions of public discourse and life."<sup>57</sup> How can we push journalists and citizens to report on and read news that matters? How can we set up a news environment that best prevents us from getting screwed?

One of the few outcomes of September 11 we can predict with certainty is that we have entered a long era that will force collisions between security and civil liberties. The good news is that despite their declining interest in news, Americans are more tolerant than their parents and grandparents were. For example, in 1937, only 46 percent of voters surveyed by Gallup said they

would be willing to vote for a qualified Jewish candidate for president; in 1999, 92 percent said they would.<sup>58</sup> However, despite the general rise in tolerance in a generation that consumes less news, Putnam has found that within the generations, the more one is engaged in society, the more tolerant one is.<sup>59</sup> That is, people who are civically involved tend to be more tolerant than their age peers. Presumably, news consumption positively correlates, too.

We live in pivotal times and are faced with important decisions. The fall of communism forced the world to remake itself; so too does the long shadow of September 11, 2001. This book is about the tuned-out generations who will lead our children and grandchildren. Its conclusion proposes the tools we will need to give them to tune back in.