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A New Standard of News Quality: Burglar Alarms for the Monitorial Citizen

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Scholarly evaluations of the quality of news are often negative, sometimes scathingly so. The rise of soft news and market-driven journalism in recent years has increased the intensity of this criticism. This article argues, however, that much criticism of news is based on an ideal of citizenship and a standard of quality that are neither realistic nor necessary for the functioning of democracy. The article therefore proposes a new, less demanding standard of quality and defends it as adequate to the informational needs of citizens in a democracy.

Keywords mass media, news standards, political information, soft news

The gales of creative destruction, which Joseph Schumpeter called the life force of capitalism, have not spared the news business. New technology has given rise to new channels and new kinds of news that have shaken the old order. Television news has been most affected. The stately network news broadcasts, which once held 85% of the entire TV audience in their time slot with a diet of mostly hard and sober news, have gone soft, lost roughly half their audience, and face possible extinction. Daily newspapers, also struggling to keep up with broad-band TV, have also softened and lost audience. In a sign of the times, the *New York Times*, the "Gray Lady" of past decades, now carries front-page stories about baseball players and a daily splash of color photography.

Meanwhile, many of the new information programs serve up even softer news—about crime, natural disasters, music, sports, and even pets. For some Americans, these new programs have become the main source of all news. For example, figures presented by Baum suggest that nearly as many Americans saw soft news accounts of the U.S. bombing of Sudan and Afghanistan in 1998, which highlighted parallels with the movie *Wag the Dog*, as saw the network news stories about the event (Baum, in press).

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This brave new world of market-driven, heavily soft news raises hard questions about its sufficiency. Public affairs reporting in the United States has never been impressively sophisticated, and it has now gotten noticeably less so. Can citizens who get most of their public affairs information from the new soft news discharge the duties of citizenship in a democracy? Thomas Patterson, one of the nation's most respected media scholars, takes a pessimistic view. The evidence, he says, "suggests that soft news and critical journalism are weakening the foundation of democracy by diminishing the public's information about public affairs and its interest in politics" (p. 2).

Numerous thoughtful observers share Patterson's concern. But the question of proper news standards is difficult and infrequently analyzed. Hence, this article asks: By what clear normative standard should the quality of the news be judged?

As best I can discern, most scholars answer this question by assuming a normative standard that developed during the Progressive period about 80 years ago. The standard, which I call the Full News standard, is that the news should provide citizens with the basic information necessary to form and update opinions on all of the major issues of the day, including the performance of top public officials.

I argue in this essay that that the Full News standard makes unrealistically heavy demands on many citizens. I therefore suggest a less stringent standard for the bulk of mass news. Amending an idea in a classic paper by Mathew McCubbins and Thomas Schwartz (1984), I call it the Burglar Alarm news standard. The key idea is that news should provide information in the manner of attention-catching "burglar alarms" about acute problems, rather than "police patrols" over vast areas that pose no immediate problems. The Burglar Alarm standard addresses only a fraction of the problems that bedevil the news. Among the problems it does not address are accuracy, sensationalism, negativity, and independence. Nor does it address standards for elite news, such as that provided by National Public Radio or the *New York Times*. What the Burglar Alarm standard does address is how much public affairs information the traditional mass news media—local TV news, network news, and most daily newspapers—should carry and how they should present this information.

The article has four sections. The first outlines criteria by which one may evaluate alternative standards of news quality. The second offers a sketch of the development of the Full News standard and evaluates it. The third develops and evaluates the Burglar Alarm standard. The fourth considers the research implications of the new standard.

Desiderata of a Standard of News Quality

What Is Meant by News Quality?

For many citizens, news is a form of private entertainment. They feel better as a result of knowing about the state of the world beyond their immediate experience. But insofar as news is merely entertainment, there is little reason for political scientists or communication scholars to care about its quality.

The news, however, is also important for its contribution to self-government. If citizens can't easily get political information that is independent of politicians and government, democracy will suffer. Or so many, including myself, assume. Hence, when observers worry that that the news has become too soft,[1] or that its political information quotient is too low, they are usually worrying that the news is failing to provide citizens the public affairs information they need to perform their role as citizens. For purposes of

this article, then, the question of news quality is whether news provides a sufficiently rich and engaging ration of political information to make democracy work. This is a normative question, because we all believe that the news media should provide sufficient information to make democracy work.

The question is complicated by the fact that the line between news and entertainment is increasingly blurred. Traditional news has gotten softer, and many new kinds of information programming have begun to carry public affairs information. Not only do shows like *Oprah* and late night comedy convey information about war, they now also involve themselves in presidential elections. One must assume this trend will continue. Just as grocery stores that mostly sell food now often carry a bit of almost everything—from pliers to socks to reading glasses—entertainment shows increasingly carry bits of content on public affairs. And just as the modern grocery store makes it possible for some people to avoid ever going to a hardware store, so modern entertainment shows may offer just enough political content that some viewers may never feel a need to tune in to traditional news. Does this mean that the Burglar Alarm standard should apply to Oprah as well as to traditional news?

Even though shows like these should be evaluated in light of their increasingly important contribution to the news, I make no attempt to do so. My aim is only to develop a standard for news in traditional news formats. Although there are clear differences even among these formats, I take no notice of them in this article.

The General Elements of a Standard of News Quality

Before considering any particular standard of news quality, I consider the general criteria such a standard should meet. I see three, as follows:

1. *Informational Needs of Self-Governance.* The most important criterion for assessing the quality of the news is that it should provide the information citizens need to discharge their democratic responsibilities. There are many democratic responsibilities, but the one I shall focus on is holding officials accountable in elections. What information, then, do citizens need to hold leaders accountable? The answer depends on one's model of politics. How does the political system structure choice? What is needed for effective choice within this system? The question of an appropriate standard of news quality cannot be answered apart from answers to, or at least assumptions about, these questions. Hence, in the analysis that follows, I will sketch the model of democratic politics that underlies my own and other standards of news quality.

2. *Feasibility.* It does little good to urge a standard of news quality that requires more of citizens than they are able or willing to give. Nor is there much point in a standard that requires more resources for news production than are available. What is feasible in these respects may vary across circumstances. A rich society composed of highly educated citizens may usefully aspire to higher quality news than a poor one. What is feasible in countries like Britain, which have a tradition of public subsidies for news production and a population accustomed to news produced with the aid of subsidies, may not be feasible in the United States, with its free market tradition. Despite this variability, the notion that real constraints exist on what can be produced and consumed in a given country must be accommodated in one's choice of news standard.

3. *Critical Potential.* Although recognizing limitations in what can be accomplished in a particular time and place, a reasonable standard of news quality cannot simply accept whatever exists as good and sufficient. After all, one important purpose of any standard is to point toward feasible improvement. The standard must therefore be able to highlight shortcomings in existing news and to generate ideas about how it can be improved.

With general matters now out of the way, I proceed to a review of two particular standards: the Full News standard, which I take to be the reigning standard, and the Burglar Alarm standard, which I argue is a more suitable standard for mainstream news.

The Full News Standard of News Quality

The Full News standard did not emerge, full blown and in final form, in the nation's founding period. Rather, it evolved through at least three phases. Because the Full News standard is best understood in light of this development, I offer a brief overview of it. My account relies heavily on Michael Schudson's *The Good Citizen* (1998).

The founding generation was certainly concerned about the diffusion of what passed in its day for high quality news and undertook a number of measures to ensure that it would occur. Most notable, perhaps, were postal subsidies. But newspapers in the early national period did not gather news; more often, they simply reprinted the personal communications of people who had the means to travel to distant locations and send letters home. One might say, then, that an important part of what the early newspapers did was to promote discussion among the gentry.

It is not clear that the founders expected ordinary citizens to be important consumers of this news. Their model of politics is well encapsulated in their constitutional plan for presidential selection: Voters would in most states choose members of state legislatures, who would choose members of the Electoral College, who would choose the president. The informational requirements of this role were limited. As Schudson writes, "Little was expected in the way of political knowledge from voters, at least, little of the sort of knowledge that today's civic moralists urge upon people. The knowledge that citizens of the 1790s were expected to have was local knowledge—not of laws or principles, but of men" (p. 81). To be politically informed "meant only to be informed about the character of candidates for [local] public office" (p. 72). There is an obvious bias in this model of politics and ideal of citizenship—a bias consistent with the interests of those who created the ideal. We will have further occasion to observe this bias at work.

The early national period was, by modern standards, barely democratic. The electorate was fettered with a property qualification in many states and yet still not allowed a direct vote for president. By the 1830s, many fetters on the electorate had fallen away. Universal white male suffrage, direct election of the president, and a vigorous party system remade the political culture of the nation. Yet, in Schudson's view, elections were still not viewed as occasions for informed deliberation. Exuberant partisanship, not informed choice, was the ideal. Those few who rejected partisanship in favor of independence were "excoriated, their manhood questioned" (McGerr, 1986, p. 14). Parties conducted campaigns by means of partisan "spectacles"—torchlight parades of excited partisans, family picnics, and silly competitive games, such as lashing together trees to form the tallest pole bearing one's party banner. These events were accompanied by speeches, but the speeches were in the spirit of the spectacles—rabble-rousing spellbinders by professional orators rather than intellectually serious discussions. Even the most famous of these oratorical events—the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858—was, as Schudson maintains, long on phony rhetoric and crowd-pleasing canards.

Newspaper circulation grew steadily in the 19th century, bringing public affairs information to a much bigger part of the electorate. But until late in the century, newspapers still made little effort to create an informed citizenry per se. Their unabashed aim was partisan mobilization. As Michael McGerr (1986) writes:

> Always ready to expose the opposing party's "lies" and "roorbacks," the editor set an example of militant, combative partisanship for his readers. "ANOTHER DEMOCRATIC SHAM" ran a typical heading in the Republican New York Tribune in 1880. Democratic papers took the same tack. In 1876, the New York World could head a news story about a Republican leader "HOW BLAINE KEEPS UP HIS LYING STATEMENTS." . . .
>
> In much of the press, partisan opinion seemed almost to overwhelm the news. The mid-nineteenth century paper, Berman Brockway has insisted, "was not a newspaper at all. It contained little news of a general character, and almost no local intelligence. It was simply the organ of a party.". . .
>
> Papers habitually reported victories for their party as "Good News" and "GLORIOUS NEWS." "BOYS, WE'VE GOT 'EM," the New York Tribune exulted over a report of state elections in 1860. (pp. 18, 20)

Even when lacking a formal affiliation with parties, newspapers often functioned as partisan cheerleaders—boosting their candidates and lambasting those of the opposition, crowing about victories and wailing over defeats. "Bryan, Tutor of Anarchy" read a typical headline in the nominally independent but inveterately Republican *Chicago Tribune* in the election of 1896.

In this period, then, politics was organized by parties; the good citizen was a good partisan; and a good newspaper was one that presented a fare of reliable partisanship to a partisan audience. Strange as it may seem to contemporary Americans, most of the leading intellectuals of the day were comfortable with these ideals—in no small part because many were themselves partisan newspaper editors. Thus, we again find a coincidence between news standards and the interests of leading political intellectuals.

But beginning in the 1870s, the partisan organization of politics came under attack. By the time the reform impulse crested in the Progressive reforms of the early 1900s, the American party system had been profoundly changed. Key elements—patronage, spectacular campaigning, party-supplied ballots, and the ideal of loyal partisanship—had been replaced by new institutions and ideas, including civil service, "educational campaigns," the Australian ballot, and the ideal of the independent voter.

In promoting political independence, reformers argued that "politics ought to be about informed choice rather than partisan emotion. . . . The voter [ought to keep up] with the news less to bask in the glow of his party's achievements than to peruse reports on the various issues, politicians, and parties of the day" (Schudson, 182). Thus, attacks on partisanship carried over into attacks on the partisan press.

> During the late 'sixties and early 'seventies, a group of newspapermen, mostly Republicans, began to reconsider their relationship to the parties. . . . Unhappy with their party, the liberal editors criticized the constraints of party loyalty and deplored the twisting of the news for partisan purpose. "Independent Journalism!—that is the watchword of the future of the profession," exclaimed Whitelaw Reid, perhaps the leading spokesman for the movement (McGerr, 1986, pp. 113, 114).

The movement for independent journalism was as successful as any movement could hope to be. By the first decade of the 20th century, independent papers dominated most big cities, and the nominally partisan papers that remained had “largely abandoned their old role of creating for readers an essentially political world comprehensible in partisan terms. Like the independent press, Republican and Democratic papers downplayed partisanship, promised fair reporting, and generally produced it” (McGerr, 1986, pp. 133–134). The few holdouts, of which the *Chicago Tribune* was one, lost the mantle of respectability that open partisanship once conveyed.

Journalists of the time understood this as a profound change. “The honest reader may take our opinion on trust, if he chooses,” said one editor. “But if he prefers, as he ought, we are bound to furnish him the raw material. And that is the philosophy of independent journalism in a nutshell.” “The epoch in which the editor imagined that he must do all the thinking for the people is about past,” said another editor. “The people now think for themselves and what they ask of the editor is simply a text of fact.” (McGerr, 1986, p. 119)

It is far from clear how much citizens really demanded these changes. But changes did occur. The good citizen was no longer the exuberant partisan but the cool independent. He was also an Informed Citizen. Rather than march in torchlight parades, he studied the issues; rather than cast a straight party ballot, he evaluated candidates on their individual merits. “The new model of politics increased the demands on the citizen. Those who would vote needed more information to cast a ballot than the loyal partisan of the nineteenth century” (Schudson, 1998, p. 185). Good journalism thus became journalism that enabled citizens to form their own opinions about politics, as required by the new model of politics. I call the news standard implicit in this development the Full News standard.

Full News does not mean all news, which is obviously impossible. The name is intended to capture an aspiration to sober, detailed, and comprehensive coverage of public affairs, as required by the new ideal of the informed citizen. The Full News standard stands in contrast to the blatantly partisan coverage of the previous period. Journalism, whose formation as a profession coincided with the mugwump and Progressive reform movements, took up the Full News standard and incorporated it into the journalistic culture, thereby enhancing its importance. The relationship was reciprocal: The notion that citizenship required something like Full News enhanced the prestige of journalism even as journalism touted the new ideals of citizenship and news.

It is worth recalling that what it meant to keep abreast of public affairs may have been qualitatively different in the 19th century. Social science was still conducted in the form of public discussion groups; the number of countries in the “civilized” world capable of generating reportable news was small; nostrums like the abolition of banks and corporations were debated seriously; and more stress was laid on sound principles than on mastery of complex bodies of knowledge, which hardly existed. As a result, an educated person who chose to follow public affairs really could keep abreast of them in a way that is hardly possible today. In this environment, an ideal of the informed citizen and the Full News standard were more realistic than they are today.

Even so, McGerr and Schudson, the two scholars who have done most to explain the rise of new ideas of news and citizenship, are not much enamored of them. The Progressive anti-party reforms, says Schudson (1998), “left the public sphere not only cleansed but bleached of the colors that had made people care about it” (p. 155). He goes on to propose an alternative to the Informed Citizen, which he calls the Monitorial Citizen. McGerr, for his part, sees the attack on the partisan press as part of a larger

attack on "popular politics," a type of politics that, with its emphasis on spectacle, drew high levels of participation. He believes the anti-party reforms caused a decline in turnout in presidential elections from 80% to 85% in non-southern states in the late 19th century to about 60% to 65% in the 1920s.

An emphatic theme in McGerr's analysis is that the anti-party reforms, including the more intellectual style of journalism, favored the class interests of the reformers more than the interests of ordinary Americans. The reformers tended to be the well-educated descendents of old American families. They were not heavily represented among the leaders of the new industrial order, and were generally unable to compete for political power in the rough-and-tumble parties of the day. Their comparative advantage lay in words, ideas, expertise, and information—precisely the qualities that, as they said, ought to be the basis of politics. McGerr writes:

> Here was the significance of the growing number of college-trained journalists: they brought the press more firmly within that upper-class social group most troubled by traditional partisan politics after the Civil War. (McGerr, 1986, p. 113)

Although the Full News standard emerged from a particular movement at a particular point in the country's development, its cultural importance has grown with time. It continues to have the implicit allegiance of professional journalists, and it underlies much scholarly criticism of the news. For example, a central point in W. Lance Bennett's *News: The Politics of Illusion* is that

> The news is often too fragmentary and superficial in its focus on personalities and their power struggles to be of much use to citizens. . . .
>
> The virtual absence of explanation or analysis in the news leaves the origins of events unexplored. . . .
>
> Filled with mysteries, melodrama, and stereotypes and short on analysis and explanations, the daily news provides little solid basis for critical thinking or effective action. (Bennett, 1997, pp. xiii, xv)

Bennett shows in detail that much of what actually happens in public affairs is either reduced to simple images or treated in an episodic manner that precludes real understanding or both. For example, in a discussion of news coverage of events in Central America over the past three decades, he observes that coverage peaks in periods in which American interests are, in the opinion of Washington policymakers, threatened and subsides afterwards. As he remarks at one point:

> The big story of the 1990s could have been how the political systems, economies, and societies of Central America were affected by the years of bitter struggle. Once the drama ended, however, so did most of the coverage. Where was the follow-up analysis looking at how best to create healthy democracies and stable economies? As the attention of Washington policy makers turned to trouble spots elsewhere in the world—Somalia, Bosnia, the former Soviet Union—so did the news cameras. (p. 61)

The heart of this criticism, as I read it, is that the news media ought to be doing much more to provide citizens with the "raw material" to develop their own opinions on

important matters. To be sure, the "raw material" Bennett has in mind consists of competing analytic and explanatory perspectives rather than "simply a text of fact," as the Progressives might have preferred. But Bennett is nonetheless in line with Progressive ideals in these important ways: He believes that democracy requires citizens to develop opinions about the full range of important issues, even unexciting ones; he wants citizens to have a basis for these opinions independent of what government officials recommend; and he believes the news ought to provide the material to sustain such thought.[2]

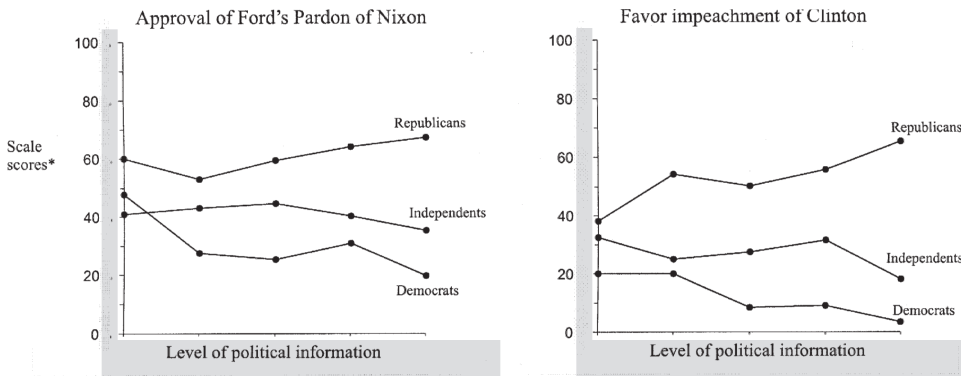
Communication scholars are, to be sure, keenly aware of the limited capacity and motivation of citizens to assimilate news. As Doris Graber comments in a recent essay, "Citizens will never pay attention to all they need to know because human capacity to absorb and process information will always be limited" (Graber, in press). She further attacks as a "cruel joke" the notion that even the *New York Times* could report "all the news that's fit to print." Nonetheless, most communication scholars who examine the content of news continue to criticize it for failure to provide a fuller, more serious, and more analytical diet of news. The passages from Bennett's *Politics of Illusion* as cited above, along with a passage from Thomas Patterson's *Out of Order* to be cited below, are in my opinion broadly representative of the stance of the communication field toward news quality—a stance deeply critical of news for failing to live up to the high demands of what I am calling the Full News standard.

Evaluation of the Full News Standard

The point of departure for reformers was that citizens should become, and were becoming, independent of parties and needed a richer diet of information for this reason. But parties are alive and well. Despite temporal variation, voters are not becoming more independent of them. The best available estimate is that voters of the 1980s and 1990s are about as partisan in their presidential voting as were voters in the heyday of parties in the 1880s and 1890s (Bartels, 1998).

To be sure, voter turnout in elections is lower than a century ago. But the reason McGerr proposes—that upper class reformers depressed turnout by suppressing the means by which parties mobilized voters—may be as good an explanation as any for that decline (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). If a nonpartisan style of politics has reduced turnout without boosting the actual independence of voters from parties, perhaps the non-partisan style needs reevaluation.

More importantly, the reformers considered opinions formed on the basis of diligent attention to public affairs as the alternative to blind partisanship. Thus, information would lead to independent opinions that would take the place of, and perhaps even undermine, partisanship as a basis for political choice. Survey evidence shows, however, that information nearly always reinforces rather than undermines partisanship. To demonstrate this, I will take the example of the public's reactions to unambiguous presidential scandal. If a partisan wishes to extract the last ounce of punishment from presidents of the other party but turns a forgiving eye to the shortcomings of his own party's presidents, it can be taken as an indication of blind partisanship. Figure 1 presents evidence of such partisanship from the Watergate and Lewinsky scandals. As can be seen, Democrats and Republicans differ in their responses to the shortcomings of Presidents Nixon and Clinton: Democrats are more inclined to oppose a pardon for Nixon, thereby holding the door open for further punishment, but they oppose impeachment of a Democratic president over his transgressions. Republicans exhibit the reverse inclinations: They want to punish Clinton but not Nixon. This is perhaps to be expected. But the key point



*Scores are means on scales that have values of 1 equal to approve/impeach, 0 equal to disapprove/oppose impeachment, and .5 equal to don't know. The questions are v2166 and v534 in the 1974 and 1998 NES surveys. Information in 1974 is measured by interviewer rating of respondent's level of political information; information in 1998 is measured by a multi-item information test, rescaled to the distribution of the 1974 measure. Party is measured by the standard NES question, with independent leaners counted as partisans.

Source: 1974 and 1998 National Election Studies.

Figure 1. The effect of party and information on reaction to the scandals of Presidents Nixon and Clinton.

of Figure 1 is the effect of political information on judgment. As can be seen, increases in information do not induce Democrats and Republicans to become more even-handed in their reaction to presidential scandal. The effect is in the other direction—toward blind partisanship.

These data are typical. Moreover, the tendency of the highly informed to be more partisan carries over into presidential voting. Candidates, issues, and national conditions change from one election to the next, but the votes of the highly informed tend not to. Far more than the less informed, sophisticates remain loyal to their customary party. This leaves low information voters as the ones most likely to switch parties between presidential elections in response to changes in candidates, issues, and national conditions (Zaller, in press). As regards hard-fought congressional elections—which are the only ones likely to unseat an incumbent—low and middle information voters again appear to be the most volatile (Zaller, 1996). In consequence, swings in the vote from one election to the next are disproportionately due to movements of the least informed voters.

Given this, it makes no sense to urge a stringent standard of news quality on the grounds that independent voters need this information. Surely they do, but given who they are, raising the bar on news quality is likely to result in a situation in which swing voters acquire even less information than they now do. Thus, flaws in the model underlying the Full News standard undermine the standard itself. What is needed, I suggest, is a standard more tailored to the needs of low information voters.

The second criterion for a standard of news quality is that it be practical: Given existing institutional and cultural constraints, news media must be willing to produce and citizens must be willing to consume the indicated kind of news. The current standard of news quality seems clearly inadequate in light of this criterion. Fifty years ago, when levels of news competition were dramatically lower and the control of professional journalists over the news product was greater, it might have been reasonable to urge higher standards of news quality. But under today's conditions, or anything re-

motely like them, it is difficult to imagine that the kind of media that the bulk of the news audience prefers will alter its ways as dramatically as the Full News standard implies it should. It still makes sense to urge this standard on the higher quality niche media that have developed, such as National Public Radio or the *Wall Street Journal,* but not on media that are attempting to maintain large audiences.

The third criterion for a standard of news quality is critical bite. Without doubt, the Full News standard packs a critical wallop. As deployed in Bennett's *Politics of Illusion*, it seems to me an extremely useful device for educating readers with respect to limitations in our current system of mass communication. The same can be said for Thomas Patterson's *Out of Order*, which I discuss below. But I do not see that the critical benefit of the Full News standard would be compromised by maintaining a parallel analysis based on a standard more suited to the bulk of the traditional news media.

The Burglar Alarm Standard of News Quality

The Ideal of the Monitorial Citizen

One of the key ideas in Schudson's (1998) *Good Citizen* is that the ideal of the informed citizen needs rethinking. The essence of the ideal is that citizens should keep themselves sufficiently informed that they can judge candidates and issues independent of party. Schudson is by no means opposed to an informed citizenry. But he says it is asking too much to expect citizens to follow public affairs in all their particulars. He therefore wants a way for citizens to get the job done with less strain and effort. As he writes:

> We have contracted much of childhood education to public schools and expert teachers rather than to ourselves as parents. Parents still help with the homework, "enrich" their children's education with efforts of their own, and know how to assist or intervene in the school system when necessary. We have divided medical care among hospitals and physicians on the one hand, and households on the other, where our shelves are stocked with diet books, women's magazines, Dr. Spock, and an array of over-the-counter medicines.
>
> We have arrived, in short, at a division of labor between expertise and self-help that gives credit to both. We do this in politics, too, but without having found a place in either popular rhetoric or democratic theory for the use of specialized knowledge. (p. 312)

Schudson's solution to the void in democratic theory is the idea of the "Monitorial Citizen." Rather than try to follow everything, the monitorial citizen scans the environment for events that require responses. For many purposes, just scanning the headlines is sufficient. He proposes the following analogy:

> Picture parents watching small children at the community pool. They are not gathering information; they are keeping an eye on the scene. They look inactive, but they are poised for action if action is required. The monitorial citizen is not an absentee citizen but watchful, even while he or she is doing something else. (p. 311)

There are, to be sure, times when citizens should vigilantly gather information about politics. These would be instances when something has gone awry, as when, in the

example of parents and children, a child is hurt and needs a parent's full attention to diagnose and deal with the problem. But in normal times, monitoring is enough.

Citizens, like parents, are entitled to multidimensional lives. More than most political intellectuals, Schudson acknowledges that there are things citizens might want to do with their time—virtuous things—besides engage in politics. As he observes:

> Political theorists are eloquent about public life, the role of public intellectuals, the necessity of a public sphere, and the virtues of the common good, but there is a time also to think further on the private life . . . on the joys of appreciating a sunset, humming a tune, or listening to the quiet breathing of a sleeping child. (p. 312)

An Alternative News Standard: The Burglar Alarm

In proposing to modify the ideal of the informed citizen, Schudson challenges one of the icons of our political culture. But he does not extensively develop his proposal or ground it in an intellectual tradition. Nor did he use it as the basis for rethinking the Full News standard of news quality. I take both of these two steps, beginning with an overview of intellectual traditions that the Monitorial Citizen echoes but does not draw upon.

For decades, it has been conventional wisdom within the disciplines of economics, psychology, decision sciences, and even political science that the human mind has only limited capacity for fully informed and synoptic decision making, and that most of the time it must make do with satisficing, heuristics, and similar effort-saving techniques. The argument that citizens have no motivation in terms of rational self-interest for making large investments in political information, and can attain reasonable collective control on the basis of much less effort, is more than 50 years old (Schumpeter, 1942). To date, however, it has not led to widespread reevaluation of the Full News standard or systematic attempts to create a more appropriate one.

I begin my effort to create such a standard with Downs's *Economic Theory of Democracy*, which devotes several chapters to the problem of political information. His starting point is that such information is costly—in the sense that acquiring it takes a great deal of time that could be better spent on other things—but that "most of the costs of gathering, selecting, transmitting, analyzing, and even evaluating data can be shifted to others" (Downs, 1967, p. 222).

> In any highly specialized society, many areas of decision pose literally incomprehensible problems for those who are not experts therein. Yet non-experts often must have opinions concerning the aptness of policies in these areas in order to make important political choices. For example, the nature of national defense . . . is so complex that almost everyone who does not specialize in [it] must rely for his opinion upon those who do. (pp. 230–231)

As Downs points out, many of those who specialize in complex information broadcast their results widely. Parties, businesses, unions, religious groups, ethnic groups, and civil rights groups are obvious examples. Their analyses of complex social problems are called subsidized information, because individuals can consume it without paying the full cost of producing it. According to Downs, the rational citizen makes the fullest use of such information. To be sure, the groups offering it always have a bias, but the biases are generally known. Even political parties, which Downs considers a most

suspect source of information, can provide useful guidance if voters take into account party interests. In one of his most original analyses, Downs shows that ideologies can be seen as short-cuts by which parties convey information about the policies they will follow. Thus, Downs's rational citizen does not engage in the arduous task of analyzing issues, but instead constructs a set of free or subsidized information sources that match his or her own interests. Even the latter task can entail much work, but Downs suggests that voters can rely on friends, family, coworkers, and others with whom they share interests for cues about which sources should be trusted. By careful choice of information sources, voters can find out what they need to know with minimal cost.

A well-known problem with Downs's rational choice argument is that it proves too much. It proves, in particular, that it is not individually rational for a citizen to vote because the probability that any one person's vote in an election will affect the outcome is infinitesimally small. As Thomas Schwartz has remarked, a voter is more likely to be mugged on the way to the polls than to swing an election outcome. Given this, Downs observes that "it seems probable that for a great many citizens in democracy, rational behavior excludes any investment whatever in political information per se" (p. 245).

Because many citizens do acquire political information and vote, Downs tries, with limited persuasiveness, to backpedal from this strong conclusion. To this day, it remains difficult to explain, within the rational choice tradition, why citizens bother to vote or acquire information. Still, the basic thrust of Downs's analysis of citizens' information needs and strategies remains intact. The idea that citizens can use "subsidized information" from sources sharing their interests is especially important.

Arthur Lupia and Mathew McCubbins have shown, moreover, that citizens can glean useful information even from those they disagree with (Lupia & McCubbins, 1998). For example, Lupia (1994) analyzes voting on a complex set of five California ballot initiatives. Lupia argues that voters who knew simply the positions of the opposing groups on the five propositions were nearly as good at sorting them out as voters who knew details of the initiatives. That is, source information, which is easy to obtain, was nearly as effective as what Lupia calls "encyclopedic" information. A classic paper on congressional oversight of the executive branch by McCubbins and Schwartz contains another important idea. A paper on Congress may seem an odd source of ideas on news standards, but the problem Congress faces in holding the vast bureaucracy accountable is similar in this critical way to the problem of citizens holding representatives accountable: The task is incredibly huge. Another similarity is that Congress, like the public, is often accused of shirking its duty to monitor. Yet, as McCubbins and Schwartz argue, Congress actually does a good job of monitoring by cleverly relying on "fire alarms" rather than "police patrols" to gather information. To illustrate this idea, suppose a citizen were looking for problems in a large city. She could conduct police patrols by driving around city streets looking for trouble, or she could install fire alarms and wait for them to tell her where the trouble is. Facing a similar task, as McCubbins and Schwartz (1984) argue, Congress relies on the latter: "What has appeared to scholars to be a neglect of oversight, we argue, is really a preference for one form of oversight [fire alarms] over another, less effective form [police patrols]" (p. 165).

The fire alarm approach consists of building provisions into laws that encourage citizens who are aggrieved by a policy to bring their problem to the attention of superior administrators or Congress. A requirement that regulators hold periodic public hearings is an example. The great advantage of the fire alarm approach is efficiency:

> Congressmen engaged in police-patrol oversight inevitably spend time examining a great many executive-branch actions that do not violate legislative

> goals. . . . [Also,] under a realistic police-patrol policy, congressmen examine only a small sample of executive-branch actions. As a result they are likely to miss violations. (p. 168).

Although not uncontroversial, the fire alarm idea has been accepted as a useful device for explaining how Congress behaves. The idea has value as a news standard as well. The many citizens who, by the evidence, dislike politics should not be led by reporters on wide-ranging patrols of political terrain. Rather, they should be alerted to problems requiring attention and otherwise left to private concerns. Not only will many refuse to come along on general patrols; they may, in tuning out the news altogether, miss things they would find useful if the news presented them in distilled form.

An objection to the fire alarm metaphor is that it could encourage reporters to wait to present news until, so to speak, the smoldering campfire has become a forest fire. But it shouldn't. Reporters should be encouraged to look for and publicize small problems before they become big. The alarm standard does, however, impose one serious constraint on news: Journalists cannot talk about every potential problem because their audience would ignore them; it is the job of reporters—in cooperation with political and interest groups—to decide what requires attention and bring it to the public.

Another objection is that fire alarm coverage will be so disjointed that, despite its urgency, it confuses rather than informs citizens. I concede this concern, but maintain that coverage more like a police patrol cannot be the solution. I propose instead a third component to my ideal news standard—the notion of a media frenzy. Larry Sabato (1993) defines a feeding frenzy as follows:

> A feeding frenzy is defined as the press coverage attending any political event or circumstance where a critical mass of journalists leap to cover the same embarrassing or scandalous subject and pursue it intensely, often excessively, and sometimes uncontrollably. (p. 6)

By defining frenzies in terms of excess, Sabato makes them bad. If, however, we omit this element, a frenzy can have positive value. An intense, dramatic story that keeps up a "critical mass" over one or several news cycles in all information media—TV news, mainstream and tabloid newspapers, entertainment, late night comedy, talk TV and radio—breaks through the fog of disjointed news and engages the attention of the Monitorial Citizen. People talk, think, learn, see the big picture, and form opinions.

Frenzied coverage can be inflammatory toward minorities, or needlessly invasive of politicians' privacy, or conducive of war hysteria. I obviously do not encourage any of this. Nor do I encourage frenzied coverage in emergency or other tense situations in which it might lead to an overheated public reaction. However, in many news contexts, frenzies are wonderful devices for focusing public attention on issues of importance.

Many frenzies, as Sabato points out, have a symbolic subtext that is different from their manifest content. For example, the frenzy over Jimmy Carter's *Playboy* interview in the 1976 presidential campaign was not about the interview per se, but about the perception among reporters that Carter was less straight-laced than he made himself out. It was a symbol for Carter's supposed hypocrisy.

Dramatic symbols can also convey real information. Some issues, such as presidential character, are too sensitive to publicly discuss in a straightforward manner but are nonetheless important to bring before the public. Others are too complex. A good symbol, like "missile defense" versus "star wars," can make arcane issues accessible. A critic might object that symbols can distort or mislead. But this problem is endemic to

communication. We should no more oppose symbols in the news than discourage metaphor in literature. Symbols are an aid to communication.

The standard of news coverage I advocate can now be expressed as follows: Journalists should routinely seek to cover non-emergency but important issues by means of coverage that is intensely focused, dramatic, and entertaining and that affords the parties and responsible interest groups, especially political parties, ample opportunity for expression of opposing views. Reporters may use simulated drama to engage public attention when the real thing is absent.

The name for the standard is the Burglar Alarm standard. As with a real burglar alarm, the idea is to call attention to matters requiring urgent attention, and to do so in excited and noisy tones. News would penetrate every corner of public space so few could miss it. Alarms would go off at irregular intervals rather than continuously—and not too often. This standard would motivate news that would catch the attention of the Monitorial Citizen, providing subsidized information that would facilitate opinion formation and making politics engaging rather than boring. The sort of simulated drama I have in mind would be in the spirit of the spectacular party campaigns of the 19th century—torchlight parades, pole-raisings, and other harmless but engaging displays. I do not use the term *burglar alarm* to be different from the McCubbins and Schwartz notion of fire alarm. I think it better for this problem. First, a burglar alarm suggests catching a thief or rascal "in the act" rather than fighting a force of nature, which better suits public affairs stories. Second, the primary purpose of a fire alarm is to alert government officials, whereas a burglar alarm is often intended to rouse ordinary people to action, which is what news stories do.

The Burglar Alarm standard is as strongly at variance with current ideals as would have been the idea of organized party competition in the 1790s. But, as in this comparison, the standard I propose is not as far from current practice as from current ideals. I can more fully communicate the kind of coverage implied by the Burglar Alarm standard by examining some specific examples of electoral coverage.

My first example is coverage of Vice-President Dan Quayle's attack on television character Murphy Brown in the 1992 campaign over the TV character's decision to have a child out of wedlock. This story embodies many, though not all, of the elements of the Burglar Alarm standard, including intense media coverage, subsidized information, entertainment, and adept use of symbols. As such, it is the kind of story that I believe can promote popular engagement in politics. The Murphy Brown frenzy is not, however, as fact-packed and analytically rich as envisioned by the Full News standard. In fact, it is classified by Sabato as a frenzy, which for him is a derogatory classification, and it is criticized by Thomas Patterson in *Out of Order* as an example of what is wrong with much news.

The Murphy Brown story broke in the aftermath of the Rodney King riots in Los Angeles. As commentators were pondering the significance of the event, Quayle linked the disturbances to the breakdown of traditional two-parent families, adding that: "It doesn't help matters when prime-time TV has Murphy Brown—a character who supposedly epitomizes today's intelligent, highly paid, professional woman—mocking the importance of fathers by bearing a child alone, and calling it just another lifestyle choice."

The term "frenzy" is an apt description of the news response to Quayle's remarks. "Quayle to Murphy Brown: You Tramp," proclaimed the *New York Daily News*. "Murphy has a Baby . . . Quayle has a Cow," announced the *Philadelphia Daily News*. The TV network news coverage was a blend of many elements—horse race analysis of the Bush campaign's strategy in raising the issue, the effect of Quayle's remarks on voters, come-

dian David Letterman's take on the story, and sound-bite reactions of everyone from the Rev. Jesse Jackson to Gary Bauer of the Family Values Institute, with plenty of people in between. By the third day of the coverage, TV journalists were dissecting the Bush administration's family values programs, and Democratic candidate Bill Clinton was on stage with his own program. Two news shows presented statistics on out-of-wedlock births, and one did a sequence on Elizabeth Walker, a real-life TV news anchor who, like the fictional anchor Murphy Brown, bore a child out of wedlock. Another program framed a feature with a white mother who was on welfare and single. The highlight of coverage of Quayle's comment was, in my opinion, a pair of dueling sound bites from individuals who looked like they had been called up from central casting to symbolically stand for the two sides of the family values debate. Said a young white housewife standing in what appeared to be a suburban church parking lot: "I think God wanted us to be together, as man and wife, so that we could raise children." Said a young black girl in pigtails, as if in reply, "My mother raises me fine, you know—as any—as good as any married couple could."

Nor did the story end here. Several months later, when *Murphy Brown* won an Emmy award, Quayle arranged for TV cameras to film him watching the award ceremony with a group of welfare mothers. And, when *Murphy Brown* returned to the air in the fall, it made clear its unflattering opinion of the vice-president.

The Murphy Brown story tied together a disparate set of themes—about race, family, morality, government policy, and the presidential election—into a fun but serious national conversation. Yet, the Murphy Brown story was not how the Progressive reformers who created the ideal of the informed citizen believed that campaigns should be covered, and it is also not how many political scientists believe that they should be covered. As Patterson (1993) has written:

> For reporters, controversy is the real issue of campaign politics. The press deals with charges and counter-charges, rarely digging into the details of the candidates' positions. It is not simply that the press neglects issues in favor of the strategic game; issues, even when covered, are subordinated to the drama of the conflict generated between the opposing sides. In this sense, the press "depoliticizes" issues, treating them more as election ritual than as objects of serious debate. Quayle's claims about the social consequences of the breakdown of the American family were not seriously examined. Murphy Brown was nearly the whole story. (p. 137)

Patterson's observation that the coverage emphasized controversy and drama more than serious analysis is certainly correct. Much of the coverage resembled a carnival parade of freaks—not actually so different from a torchlight parade—more than a systematic examination of the issue. Many contrasting points of view, sometimes only one sentence deep, were run past the viewer with no attempt to sort out which was right. Yet, only by the high intellectual standards of the Progressive Full News standard was media examination of the Murphy Brown story lacking in serious substance. Murphy Brown, as politicized by Quayle's attack, made the family values debate accessible to Americans in a way that traditional political rhetoric did not. Once that happened, reporters took a wild but nonetheless highly substantive leap into the fray—creating a critical mass of coverage (three days) on the network news; providing a multi-sided view of a complex issue; penetrating softer news outlets (tabloids, public affairs commentary on late night comedy, and surely talk radio); presenting partisan comments by

numerous interest group representatives ("subsidized information"); taking citizens into the lives of real-life single mothers (creating useful symbols); and even conducting a quick review of candidate positions. The juxtaposition of competing symbols, as in the case of the black girl and the white housewife, was, as I have suggested, the highlight of this coverage. It is by no means obvious that ordinary voters—or even intellectuals—learn less from, or think less hard in response to, such symbolic juxtapositions than they do from traditional news.

As indicated in my development of the Burglar Alarm standard, the news media could not maintain this sort of campaign coverage day after day. The bulk of coverage is bound to be more staid. In view of this, I shall examine the applicability of the Burglar Alarm standard to another domain, namely, coverage of individual members of the House of Representatives. The choice of this domain is motivated by my need to show more directly that the Burglar Alarm standard can work to achieve political accountability, and by the availability of Douglas Arnold's outstanding book on the subject, *Congress, the Press, and Political Accountability*. The book examines all coverage for a randomly selected 25 members of Congress (MCs) in one of 25 newspapers constituting a small but representative sample of newspapers during a two-year period.

A story in the *New York Times* from the 2000 elections usefully sets the stage for this analysis. It begins with a vignette of a potentially strong congressional candidate who may sit out the elections in order to devote more time to his family. It then continued:

> In a year like 2000, when the two parties are locked in a furious battle for control of the House, the civics books would suggest that candidates . . . would be lining up to join the fray. In fact . . . for all the talk about the battle for the House, perhaps as few as a tenth of the Congressional districts will have truly competitive races, with a fair contest of ideas and agendas.
>
> In most districts, held by well-financed incumbents, there will probably not be much of a battle at all, many political professionals say.
>
> "I think the dirty little secret is out, that 94 percent of all incumbents win," said Charles Cook, a longtime analyst of Congressional campaigns who publishes a political newsletter.
>
> It is a paradox for what was intended by the framers as "the people's house," so responsive and closely attuned to the voters that it needed the Senate to keep it in check.[3]

In the Progressive model of democracy, citizens should take each election as an occasion to examine the record of their MC to decide whether she or he deserves another term. If this fails to occur, it is, as the news story informs us, a surprising violation of civics book notions of democracy, a paradox, and a "dirty little secret."

But in the Monitorial Citizen's model of democracy, the obligations of public life should be dispatched with efficiency. So if party activists and the strongest potential challengers scrutinize an MC's record and decide that, even after giving it their best shot, the incumbent could not be beaten, there is no need for an expensive, time-consuming contest. The needs of democracy are met by scrutinizing the records of those incumbents whose achievements are in doubt and reelecting the rest with minimal fuss.[4] If only a few incumbents warrant the effort of serious scrutiny, so much the better.

Such different models of democracy lead, as always in my analysis, to different news standards. The Full News standard, with its roots in Progressivism, attaches no importance to what parties may or may not do by way of challenging the incumbent. Its

position is that when elections occur, the news media should cover them, period. Arnold (in press) summarizes this view:

> Some representatives in the sample faced talented, well-financed challengers. Others were entrenched incumbents who seemed immune to serious challenge. No matter where citizens happened to live, however, they deserved to find information in their local newspapers about both incumbents and challengers. Editors and reporters who assumed that representatives battling for their political lives deserved copious coverage while other incumbents and their opponents deserved minimal coverage denied some citizens the opportunity to make informed decisions. By their actions, they contributed to the safety of incumbents.

The Burglar Alarm standard, by contrast, is rooted in the idea that mediating groups should be relied upon when possible. Hence, the news should ignore races in which the opposition party mounts no serious challenge while paying close attention to those in which it does. Arnold's findings suggest they may do this. Of the 22 incumbents in his sample seeking reelection, two were defeated and three had close calls, defined as winning less than 55% of the vote. In these five cases in which voters clearly faced a real rather than a nominal contest, local newspapers produced an average of 81 articles focusing on the general election. If, as seems reasonable, we assume that most of these articles occurred in the two months following Labor Day, this is more than one article per day. In the remaining 17 races, coverage averaged about 18 articles on the campaign.

A closer look at the data indicates notable variation. One of the newspapers, the tabloid *Chicago Sun-Times*, devoted only 16 articles to a close race. But omitting the Chicago tabloid, the average of the other four was nearly 100, a number suggesting that in the heat of the campaign coverage might have approached two articles a day. Arnold does not report the placement of the campaign coverage, but he does find that a large fraction of all congressional coverage is prominently located, and it is likely that coverage of close races was, besides being far more voluminous, also better placed. In these races, finally, he finds no pro-incumbent tilt.

We have, then, something like twice-a-day coverage in most newspapers, probably prominently displayed and spread over both candidates. Surely, this is coverage that would catch the attention of the Monitorial Citizen if he or she were prepared to pay attention to public affairs at all. As for the other 17 races, the Monitorial Citizen would be left undisturbed, as the Burglar Alarm standard suggests he or she should be.

Besides covering close elections, most newspapers reliably covered MC behavior in two other areas. One was roll calls on controversial elements of the president's agenda, for which most newspapers told readers how the individual MC voted. The other involved efforts by individual MCs to prevent a major federal program or activity—such as a military base or a hospital—from shutting down.

Arnold mentions no other type of MC activity that was reliably covered in the bulk of newspapers. But pondering the matter, I thought of two other kinds of stories which would call for coverage under the Burglar Alarm standard: credible allegations that an MC broke the law or ethics standards and cases in which an MC voted against the apparent interests of his constituents. As an example of the latter, Arnold mentions a San Diego MC who voted against the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), an agreement of special concern to export-oriented San Diego.

To check coverage of ethics violations, I asked an RA to identify all cases since 1990 in which the House Ethics Committee had ruled, either favorably or unfavorably,

on a complaint. It turned out that there have been only a handful of these cases, but in all nine the local newspaper did provide coverage, and usually quite heavy coverage. With respect to voting against district interests, I have not been able to frame a suitable study design. One needs a random sample of all such cases, but it is hard to know how to get one.[5]

Altogether, then, there are several kinds of MC activity that seem to be reliably covered: close elections, votes on key elements of the president's program, efforts to prevent cutoffs of federal benefits, and ethics violations. Each of these story types is likely to involve elements of drama and controversy. Meanwhile, Arnold further reports that certain kinds of MC activity are rarely or only intermittently covered: committee work, leadership activity, bill co-sponsorship, MCs' explanations for their votes, roll calls that are not close and do not engage the president's prestige, and one-sided elections. As general categories of news, all seem likely to be less dramatic and controversial. By this summary, newspaper coverage of MCs comes much closer to satisfying the Burglar Alarm standard than the Full News standard—and may in many cases actually satisfy the former. Yet, for purposes of this article, a normative issue is more critical: Can the kinds of stories highlighted by the Burglar Alarm, taken as a set, provide the Monitorial Citizen with the information necessary to hold his or her MC politically accountable? I take up this question immediately below.

Evaluation of the Burglar Alarm Standard

The first question in evaluating the Burglar Alarm standard is whether it meets the informational needs of effective self-governance. I answer this question in the context of my most developed example, local newspaper coverage of MCs. The work of Downs, Lupia and McCubbins, and Schartz and McCubbins gives strong reason to believe that voters can make good voting decisions about their MC with the sort of information the Burglar Alarm standard implies. But anything less than fully informed voters could entail risk. Could strategic MCs, knowing that voters get only Burglar Alarm coverage, shirk their duties and get away with it? The key is whether close races and potentially close races are well-covered. If they are, MCs can be expected to know it and to avoid actions that voters would dislike if they found out. It is the same in any enforcement situation: Potential rule-breakers refrain from breaking rules if they know they will likely be caught.

It is not, I should add, clear exactly how many papers meet this standard. One close race (out of 5) in Arnold's sample was lightly covered, and others might have been close if better covered. However, the discussion here centers on the normative properties of the Burglar Alarm standard: If the Burglar alarm standard is met, could voters effectively hold their MCs accountable? My answer, based on the previous paragraph, is yes.

What of the effect of non-electoral coverage? One of Arnold's notable findings is that MC votes on key parts of the president's agenda tend to be covered even though most other votes are not. The effect of this is to increase accountability of presidents as well as MCs: If a voter sees that her or his MC has opposed the president on a key vote, it is a signal to pay attention and take sides. Yet, the Monitorial Citizen does not monitor her or his MC one roll call vote or one action at a time. Rather, she or he relies on party activists to scrutinize these roll calls, as reported in the back pages of newspapers as well as in interest group Web pages, newsletters, and "report cards" of MC behavior. The Monitorial Citizen also relies on national party leaders to collect the Washington buzz on difficult-to-observe behavior within Congress. When, as occasionally occurs,

these various agents decide on the basis of their analysis to mount a serious challenge against an incumbent MC, the Monitorial Citizen implicitly takes it as a piece of subsidized information that her or his MC may be out-of-step and deserving of retirement. As V. O. Key (1961) has noted:

> If a legislator is to worry about the attitude of his district, what he needs really to worry about is, not whether his performance pleases the constituency at the moment, but what the response of his constituency will be in the next campaign when persons aggrieved by his position attack his record. The constituency, thus, acquires a sanction largely through those political instruments that assure a challenge of the record. In the large, that function is an activity of the minority party. (p. 499)

Thus, the local newspaper is only one piece of a larger scheme of monitoring. Its most important job under the Burglar Alarm standard may be to provide coverage of elections that other actors cause to be close. Beyond that, newspapers may be helpful by giving local opposition leaders and activists an early warning—via coverage of key votes and anomalous behavior—of which MCs appear vulnerable. These are modest requirements, but if newspapers meet them, they can assure a large amount of political accountability.

In light of the continuing importance of parties in American politics and in my argument, it might be argued that journalists should rely even more heavily on partisan cues, perhaps reviving the overtly partisan style of the 19th century. This is an appealing idea. But, as noted above, the least informed voters tend to be least partisan. A revival of the partisan press might be as uncongenial to them as the Full News standard.

A separate normative concern centers on accuracy and responsibility: If the news media are combing the landscape for items they can convert to frenzied or at least entertaining coverage, is there not a danger of stories that will dupe the public or stir injurious passion? I concede this concern. But irresponsible reporting will be a problem under any news standard. The appropriate response is not to deaden the news, but to educate reporters to be responsible. The examples of Murphy Brown and congressional coverage show that the Burglar Alarm standard can be made to work. The challenge of the news is to expand the scope of this sort of engaging, responsible coverage.

The second criterion for a standard of news quality is that it be commercially viable: Given existing institutional and cultural constraints, news media must be willing to produce and citizens must be willing to consume the indicated kind of news.

At first blush, the strength of the Burglar Alarm standard is that it is compatible with current news and market trends. Yet, there is concern that the market for traditional news will continue to decline if hard news continues to soften. This is because, if traditional news encourages its audience to expect entertainment from the news, the audience will soon abandon news altogether in order to get the real thing from Hollywood. The decline of network news audience share, and more recently the decline in local news audience share, has been taken as evidence for this view (Patterson, 2000). Yet, with so many new programs entering the market, it is virtually guaranteed that established players will lose share. The question is whether traditional news programs would lose more or less if they stick to a hard news strategy. How can one know? It is as plausible to argue that traditional news should meet the new competition with softer news, since that is where the strongest competition is. The Burglar Alarm standard is intended to provide a workable and yet normatively defensible standard for popular news—as opposed to elite news—as it remakes itself to meet this competition.

The third criterion for a standard of news quality is critical bite. That is, the standard should provide a basis for constructive criticism of existing practice. Because the Burglar Alarm standard is closer to actual news content, it affords less potential for root-and-branch criticism than does the Full News standard. It does, nonetheless, have bite: Papers, like the *Chicago Sun-Times*, that fail to cover competitive elections can be loudly criticized for failing to provide coverage that political accountability truly does require.

Such criticism may seem mild compared to what the Full News standard can motivate. Yet, one may also ask: What is the point of criticizing popular news for failing to live up to the Full News standard, given that many of their consumers do not want anything like that level of news? Is this really a fruitful tactic?

In contrast, I see criticism of the *Sun-Times* for failing to cover a competitive election—not any election, but a competitive one—as illustrative of many criticisms that that even tabloid papers and local TV news, which have excused themselves from obligation to the Full News standard, could be realistically expected to take seriously. The way to improve traditional news is not to pressure it to be what it obviously cannot, but to offer a guide to subtle but important changes that can be made within existing constraints.

I do not claim that there is no cost whatsoever to basing news on the Burglar Alarm rather than Full News standard. The situation is analogous to protection from actual crime. Some citizens are so concerned that they organize community crime patrols to combat it, while others, facing the same threat, leave their windows open at night. Consumer demand for the information necessary to hold political leaders accountable varies in the same way—and with the same potential for harm from lack of diligence.

The challenge for communication scholars is to squarely face up to these differences in audience demand for news and to design news standards and styles that, to the extent possible, reconcile them with the informational needs of citizenship. The Burglar Alarm standard is a step in that direction—and away from the Progressive view that what suits the most educated classes suits all. My hope is that, if the Burglar Alarm standard is taken seriously, it will lead more citizens to get more information than if the Full News standard remains dominant.

Future Research

This discussion raises many research questions. The first is how well coverage of news domains other than the politics of congressional elections stands up against the Burglar Alarm standard. Is it true that, by this standard, news quality has fallen to the point that democracy is undermined? To find out, it would be necessary, as in Arnold's study, to describe coverage in a representative sample of media—quite possibly the same, computer searchable sample Arnold used—and, as in my analysis, to analyze the results in light of a particular model of the political process. Altogether, this would be a big task. Another research project would be to determine how news style affects citizen learning and interest. I have assumed that the drama and intense focus of frenzies—or, more generally, news that is more entertaining—promotes learning, but I could cite no evidence. I suggest research in the general form of *Common Knowledge* (Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992), but tailored to news style, such as effects of a Murphy Brown–style frenzy versus straight news.

Another project is to examine the dynamics of frenzies. In a highly promising line of research, Wolfsfeld and Sheafer (2002) examine the causes and political biases in a related phenomenon they call "waves," which involve the tendency of reporters to give

intense coverage to an issue for a short period. These scholars show that news waves have a regular structure that is quite susceptible to quantification and analysis. Finally, research should undertake empirical tests of the effect of news quality on political accountability. For example, the quality of MC coverage in Arnold's sample ranges from scarcely any at all to coverage that might, in a few cases, meet the Full News standard. The question thus arises: Does high quality coverage result in a stronger link between constituent attitudes and MC voting behavior? If so, it would undermine my arguments about the sufficiency of the Burglar Alarm standard.[6]

Concluding Remarks

The nation's constitutional founders had a great distaste for parties and argued fiercely against them. Parties would oppose for the sake of opposition. They would stir up citizens against the government merely for the sake of political advantage. When in control of government, parties would attempt to oppress the minority. Parties would care more about their political fortunes than the good of the country (Hofstadter, 1969). These concerns are serious and realistic. Yet, parties have become so important to American politics that political scientists are fond of quoting Schattschneider's remark that democracy is unthinkable save for parties.

I cannot help seeing the soft news revolution of the late 20th century—including the softening of traditional news and the rise of infotainment shows like *Oprah*—as similar to the political revolution that gave the nation political parties in the early 19th century. Like parties, soft news is anathema to many and probably most political intellectuals, suiting neither their taste nor comparative advantage in life. Like the party revolution, soft news became a revolution in practice long before acquiring justification in theory. And like the effect of parties on the political participation of the lower classes, soft news holds the promise of increasing the number of people involved in the nation's business.

One must, of course, be concerned about the quality of this involvement: Can citizens who rely on the modern news media for their political information effectively discharge the duties of citizenship in a democracy? I have not attempted to answer this question as regards nontraditional soft news. But as regards the traditional news media, my answer is yes—provided the news adheres to the Burglar Alarm standard.

Notes

1. Hard news may be defined as information about current public affairs and government topics; soft news is information that is either personally useful or merely entertaining.

2. These quotations are from the third edition of Bennett's book, which has recently come out in a fifth edition. The much revised new edition takes the same stance as the third on these matters.

3. "Willing Contenders at a Premium in Fierce Fight to Rule Congress," R. Toner, *New York Times*, January 3, 2000, p. A1.

4. See Jacobson (2002) on how politicians strategically decide when to challenge incumbents.

5. Tom Schwartz suggests testing whether MCs oppose spending bills that favor their districts.

6. Arnold's sample of representative, Web-searchable newspapers spans 91 districts, which should be enough to examine this question. Another interesting question would be whether experienced, well-financed challengers do better, all else equal, when heavily covered.

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