THE DYNAMICS OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

MEDIA AND POLITICS IN A DIGITAL AGE

THIRD EDITION

Richard M. Perloff

THE DYNAMICS OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

The third edition of *The Dynamics of Political Communication* continues its comprehensive coverage of communication and politics, focusing on problematic issues that bear on the functioning of democracy in an age of partisanship, social media, and political leadership that questions media's legitimacy.

The book covers the intersections between politics and communication, calling on related social science disciplines as well as normative political philosophy. This new edition is thoroughly updated and includes a survey of the contemporary political communication environment, unpacking fake news, presidential communication, hostile media bias, concerns about the waning of democracy, partisan polarization, political advertising and marketing, the relationship between social media and the news media, and the 2020 election, all the while drawing on leading new scholarship in these areas.

It's ideally suited for upper-level undergraduate and graduate political communication courses in communication, journalism, and political science programs.

This edition again features online resources with links to examples of political communication in action, such as videos, news articles, tweets, and press releases. For instructors, an instructor's manual, lecture slides, and test questions are also provided. Access the support material at www.routledge.com/9780367279417

Richard M. Perloff, Professor of Communication, Political Science, and Psychology at Cleveland State University, is well-known for his scholarship on the third-person effect, hostile media biases, and persuasion, including a seventh edition of *The Dynamics of Persuasion*. Perloff also is the author of *The Dynamics of News*, as well as articles in *Communication Research*, *Communication Theory*, and *Mass Communication and Society*. He has published many essays in *The* (Cleveland) *Plain Dealer* on topics such as news and political history, along with an essay on the 50th anniversary of the Kent State shootings in *The New York Times*. A dedicated teacher, Perloff has received awards for his teaching at Cleveland State.

"In the academic world, it's rare that I think of myself as a 'fan' of other scholars. But that is exactly the way I have always felt about Rick Perloff and his contributions to the mass communication literature. Perloff's explications of theory and research are so comprehensive in scope and clear in explanation that I find myself to be an ardent fan. In *The Dynamics of Political Communication*, Perloff proves once again that he is a beacon helping scholars navigate to where we are now and shining light on where we are bound."—**Douglas McLeod, *University of Wisconsin—Madison***

"Perloff's *The Dynamics of Political Communication* remains a go-to reference for students and scholars, showing the richness and dynamic evolution of the field. This edition is full of insights on the shapeshifting contours of political communication and new evidence that helps us reconsider standard theories, concepts and arguments." —**Silvio Waisbord, *George Washington University***

"With the most recent edition of *The Dynamics of Political Communication: Media and Politics in a Digital Age*, Perloff again synthesizes key strands of literature that define contemporary political communication research, updating it to consider fake news, misinformation, populist incivility and the politicization of the pandemic fueled by increasingly ideological media."—**Dhavan V. Shah, *University of Wisconsin—Madison***

THE DYNAMICS OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Media and Politics in a Digital Age

Third Edition

Richard M. Perloff

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

Third edition published 2022
by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

and by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

First edition published by Routledge 2013
Second edition published by Routledge 2018

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN: 978-0-367-25282-3 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-0-367-27941-7 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-0-429-29885-1 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

Access the support material: www.routledge.com/9780367279417

Contents

Preface

> All we're missing is the asteroid landing with flesh-eating zombies, and our year will be complete.
>
> —Paul Lux, supervisor of elections in Okaloosa County, Fla. (Bosman et al., 2020)

Mr. Lux could have added that the flesh-eating zombies were tweeting, then eating their blue and red victims, and we would have a fitting completion to the political communication year as well.

The 2020 election year was devastating, shattering, and illuminating. The third edition of *The Dynamics of Political Communication* covers the election, but also the politics of the previous four years, focusing the book around issues, events, and ideas. It was a challenge to write this book, as events changed by the day, and I sought to combine the here-and-now with the venerable concepts that underpin our field.

Once again, the book is organized around the core importance of democracy, flawed but indispensable as it is, and the possibilities—and limits—of political communication. It emphasizes anew the importance of appreciating multiple concepts, different disciplinary ideas, and contrasting political viewpoints. You won't find one party line in the book, but rather lots of perspectives and constant devil's advocate questioning, a hallmark of the intellectual mission. I tried to be fair to all sides and was particularly mindful of this as I discussed Donald J. Trump, his rhetoric and coverage in the news. In particular, I wanted to be fair to those millions of voters who supported him in 2016 and 2020, trying to understand their grievances. However, I could not ignore empirical evidence or jarring examples of Trump's democracy-eroding activities. To do so would also display prejudice. My goal was to be tolerant, except when communication became anti-democratic, racist, or otherwise prejudiced. In those cases, as an author of a book on political communication and democracy, I expressed a point of view. The book underscores the importance of democratic norms; a free, robust press; political tolerance; institutions that glue democracy together; and

transformative political communication. These are old verities, adapted to the present age, and if we are to sustain democratic government and the fond hopes of democratic theorists, then we need to respect and apply them.

It is my hope that the book entertains, as well as communicates the complexities of political communication. It integrates the events of 2020—politics of the pandemic, the George Floyd protests, and the election—with theory and research. It reflects a thorough review of current research in the field—scholarly examination of articles in the latest major journals and books—as well as consideration of the becalming continuities offered by political history. Every edition has to bend to reflect changing times, or an author isn't doing his or her job. So, I made some changes—many actually.

- **Chapter 1** goes right to the elephant in the room, discussing fake news, misinformation, the politics of the pandemic, and systemic flaws that ail American politics and communication. The focus of the chapter and book is the United States, but examples and research cover other countries as well.

- **Chapter 2** defines politics and political communication, focusing on symbols, technology, and the decline of gatekeepers.

- **Chapter 3** expands the discussion of normative democratic issues, examining the many problems that roil contemporary democracy, as well as its virtues.

- **Chapter 4**, introducing the second part of the book, showcases the field of political communication, explaining changes and continuities.

- **Chapters 5 and 6** focus on citizenship, with Chapter 5 examining media effects on knowledge (as well as misinformation) and Chapter 6 delving into political socialization.

- **Chapter 7** covers the venerable agenda-setting concept, along with priming, agenda-building, and policy issues, with new research and examples from the 2020 election and the George Floyd protests figuring prominently.

- **Chapter 8** discusses framing, with new sections on frame-building.

- **Chapter 9** is a new chapter that takes some material from Chapter 12 in the second edition, cuts some, and adds lots of new content. It appropriately offers a discussion of the political psychology of partisanship, examining new research on selective perception, confirmatory biases, the hostile media effect, selective exposure, and polarization, along with questions about the pervasiveness of polarization.

- **Chapter 10** begins the third section on communication and the election. It offers a critical look at presidential rhetoric, with a historical review of 20th-century presidential communication strategies from JFK through Clinton, and 21st-century exemplars, notably Obama and Trump's rhetoric of tweets.

- **Chapter 11** tackles news bias, defining bias, debunking the liberal bias notion, and examining contemporary partisan wrinkles.

- **Chapter 12** focuses entirely on gender bias and news.

- **Chapter 13** covers the horse race and other press campaign biases, along with polling.

- **Chapter 14** focuses on political communication in the nomination campaign, along with conventions.

- **Chapter 15** examines political advertising in depth, beginning with contemporary advertising strategies, from microtargeting to digital developments, as well as advertising effects, normative issues, and fact-checking.

- **Chapter 16** unpacks presidential debates, their effects, drawbacks, and strengths. This final section takes stock of the election, describes democratic conundrums, and offers a smattering of suggestions to improve the quality of politics and political communication.

A glossary follows, with a definition of main terms.

I wrote the book so it would be an interesting read, but also thorough in its scholarly sweep. I hope that readers question their own views of politics, look at democracy differently, appreciate the important insights research offers, and come away with a more critical, but efficacious, perspective of political communication. And I hope scholars and colleagues find this to be a helpful contribution to the field, an enjoyable-to-read, integrative sourcebook that embraces the importance of political communication, pulls different areas together, and shows how concepts illuminate understanding of storied conundrums of politics and media.

REFERENCE

Bosman, J., Mervosh, S., Ember, S., Fortin, J., & Gebeloff, R. (2020, October 28). How the surging virus has crashed into campaigning in every imaginable way. *The New York Times*. Online: www.nytimes.com/2020/10/28/us/covid-election.html. (Accessed: October 29, 2020).

Acknowledgments

I want to first thank Felisa Salvago-Keyes for her support of this project and for working flexibly with me, tempering realism with positive feedback and good tidings about what the book can offer. Thank you, once again, Grant Schatzman for working so steadfastly, kindly, and efficiently. An additional thanks goes to Autumn Spalding for her buoyant, enjoyable emails that injected some spirit into the meticulous proofreading task.

Sharon Muskin, you did it again, with your amazing knowledge, technical expertise, and eternal patience. Thanks for everything you did—on a daily basis!

I also thank colleagues to whom I sent chapters out of the blue, and who commented, acknowledged, or otherwise gave a solipsistic book writer buoyant support. A special thanks to Bruce Newman for reinforcing and insightful comments and to Danna Young for thoughtful, resonating notes. I appreciate the comments and encouragement of so many other outstanding political communication colleagues: David J. Atkin, Jessica Baldwin-Philippi, Matthew Barnidge, Geoffrey Baym, Erik Bucy, Michael X. Delli Carpini, Stephanie Edgerly, Lauren Feldman, Alexandra Filindra, Carroll Glynn, Kate Kenski, Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick, Daniel Kreiss, Yanna Krupnikov, Shannon McGregor, Douglas M. McLeod, Miriam J. Metzger, Mehnaaz Momem, Sarah Ann Oates, Andrew Rojecki, John Barry Ryan, Lisa Sanchez, Dhavan Shah, Hillary Shulman, Sarah Sobieraj, Elizabeth Stoycheff, Jennifer Stromer-Galley, Talia Stroud, Yariv Tsfati, Nikki Usher, Chris Vargo, Emily Vraga, Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, Brian Weeks, Silvio Waisbord, Nathan Walter, Lars Willnat, Magdalena Wojcieszak, and Weiwu Zhang.

Thanks to my political communication classes, including Fall 2020 political communication students, who stayed a half-hour after class on Zoom on a couple of occasions, for such stimulating discussion. Thanks in particular to Elliot Jarrous, Jenny Fraley, Frank Mecham, Rayan Nasser, Tino Perez, and Andrea Strong for your vigorous debating of ideas.

And, also, on the local front, thank you to Anup Kumar for his bracingly critical views of news media; Rob Kraftowitz for relentlessly highlighting *New York Times* bias, proving you only critique the medium you love; Howard Abramoff for satirizing what everyone assumes to be true; and Ron and Joan Arnson for wit, as well as insights, on Trump and politics writ large and small. Thank you also Roknedin Safavi for your perspectives on humanity and politics.

And to Michael, with your substantial accomplishments in legally righting the state's excesses, doing so much to bolster civil liberties, and to Cathy, boasting a prodigious record in financial journalism, never compromising on truth, I thank you both for challenging me in the fabled, if all-too-familiar, John Stuart Mill tradition, as we discussed liberalism and news objectivity. Thank you, Julie, for your support and sitting at dinner talking about big issues.

PART ONE

Foundations of Political Communication

CHAPTER

1 Prologue

One of the verities of political communication—a centerpiece of democracy in the best of times, a symptom of its roiling polarities in the worst of times—is change. By the time you read this book charting the dynamics of political communication, the world will have changed since I described its contours, working at my laptop, viewing news of the endless devastation wrought by the pandemic, bruising presidential campaign ads, and the tumultuous finale of the 2020 election, marked by a mob of pro-Trump rioters ransacking the Capitol to disrupt the certification of the Electoral College vote. The events of the past 4 years are a testament to change, with one unbelievable series of events replaced by another and then another, in a reverberation of head-spinning chaotic gyrations.

It began back in 2016 with the astonishing electoral victory of Donald Trump, followed by allegations, then proof of Russian interference in the election; repeated denunciations of fake news disseminated by Trump that conveniently exempted Fox News from the list; his firing of an FBI director who challenged him; Robert Mueller's investigation into possible linkages between the Trump campaign and Russian electoral interference, the ways that was spun and framed by different partisan groups; Trump's vitriolic tweets; the much-discussed tax cuts Congress passed that improved the economy, some parts more than others; domestic terrorism at a Pittsburgh synagogue primed by extremist, conspiracy theory social media commentaries; a Ukraine scandal that led to Trump's impeachment by the House, his subsequent acquittal by the Senate, all covered carefully by the news, sometimes with a partisan spin; followed not long after by the coronavirus pandemic, with its beginning in China, a source of controversy along with Trump's rhetoric, then the multitude of deaths during a spring of sadness, culminating in national protests over a police killing, public opinion shifts, and symbolic changes; a national campaign waged with vigor and venom, and the contentious outcome of a presidential election. It continued into 2021, with the violent insurrection of the Capitol by hundreds of violent extremists, delusional in their belief the election was unfair, willing to interrupt

the official congressional certification of a fair, democratic presidential election. With about a week left in Trump's presidency, the House of Representatives, furious that Trump had incited the rioters' siege of a democratic ritual, proceeded with an unprecedented second impeachment proceedings, leading to Trump's impeachment, followed again by Senate acquittal.

It was the old Billy Joel history song ("We Didn't Start the Fire") on steroids, played at warp speed. But as you read this, new tumult has overtaken the turmoil of yore, raising questions about whether the once-vibrant American experiment can maintain its vitality or is creaking toward dissolution. For all the strengths of American democracy—its capacity to renew itself, checks and balances, an unbridled free press—dysfunctions are apparent everywhere. For example: politics gamed by the rich, majority sentiments ignored or silenced due to structural flaws, social media awash in misinformation.

This is the backdrop for the issues discussed in this book. It's certainly not an inviting beginning—no metaphorical promise of chocolate or basks in the sun. And it noticeably minimizes the positive influences that political communication can achieve, as well as the passion many young people felt as they protested racial injustice in the spring of 2020. But the negative attracts outsize attention psychologically, has become the dominant way most people view the political world, and therefore commands attention. Let's begin then with the catalogue of complaints that frequently greet political communication, as this provides a familiar way to enter the political communication territory, while offering a pathway to critiquing these very shortcomings, in this manner opening up the discussion to broader, cross-disciplinary, and socially significant issues.

THE DISTURBING POLITICAL COMMUNICATION ENVIRONMENT

Table 1.1 lists seven problems that characterize our once-promising, now disruptive political media ecology. The problems go beyond communication to

Table 1.1 Contemporary conundrums in American politics and political communication.

1. Racial injustice and civil unrest continue to roil America.
2. Fake news has proliferated, even as questions remain about its effects.
3. Ideological media sites have multiplied, politicizing the truth.
4. The American political environment is more divisive and partisan than in recent years.
5. Populism and distrust have become woven into the texture of contemporary political communication.
6. Politics is mean and uncivil.
7. Systemic problems illuminated by the coronavirus pandemic demand political solutions.

encompass structural aspects of American society. But political communication always exists in a broader social fabric, so it's important to examine these factors, including those that examine systemic issues involving American society.

1. Racial Injustice and Civil Unrest Continue to Roil American Politics

It was a jarring split-screen tableau. A day after Georgia—long a bastion of red-state conservatism—turned blue, electing two Democrats, including a young Jewish filmmaker and Georgia's first Black senator, a mob of pro-Trump, paramilitary violent vigilantes stormed the U.S. Capitol, brandishing Confederate flags and wearing anti-Semitic T-shirts. The parade of falsehoods and conspiracy theory dogma that dominated their online outlets contrasted sharply with the outpouring of criticism that flooded conventional news channels, consumed by concerns about the anti-democratic insurgency that gripped the Capitol on January 6, 2021. It illustrated the continuity of national civic unrest, but also "the nation's original paradox: a commitment to democracy in a country with a legacy of racial exclusion" (Herndon, 2021).

Just 6 months earlier, racial issues had jumped to center stage, with images of police violence against African Americans; massive protests against police shootings; looting, vandalism, and property damage wrought by angry mobs; and counter-demonstrators vowing to protect a city from protesters. Such was the situation that unfolded in America during the throes of a pandemic and the 2020 presidential election.

In 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois, the distinguished American academic, famously said that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line." His prophetic statement remains true more than a century after he penned it. As a result of institutional racism and systematic political indifference to the problems plaguing Black communities, scalding racial disparities remain. The net worth of a White family is about 10 times greater than that of a typical Black family, a gap that has significantly widened over the years, abetted by continuing subtle discrimination in employer hiring practices (McIntosh et al., 2020; Luo, 2009). Blacks attend less economically resourced schools than Whites and Asian Americans, contributing to economic discrepancies that perpetuate disparities in wealth and home ownership (Kristof, 2016; Bouie, 2020). African American college graduates have fewer financial assets than Whites who did not complete high school (Hannah-Jones, 2020). Health disparities are particularly grievous as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and chronic lung illnesses are more common among African Americans, contributing to a lower life expectancy among Blacks (Villarosa, 2020).

These problems aren't new, but they took on particular resonance in 2020 when the political communication environment changed in the blink of a viral moment. A nation reeling from a pandemic, rankled by partisan divisions, and

beset by Depression-level unemployment found itself in the throes of violent civil unrest. Within days after a White Minneapolis police officer killed George Floyd, an African American man in police custody, by pressing his knee to the back of Floyd's neck for nearly nine minutes, protests broke out from coast to coast.

The video of the incident went viral, outraging Americans of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, stirring tens of millions to protest to express their anger that yet another unarmed Black person had been killed by a White police officer (Williams, 2016; Chan, 2020; see Figure 1.1). Other videos of police aggression sparked anger, but the Floyd video was more impactful because the violence was spectacularly graphic, and it coincided with the recent deaths of other innocent Black Americans, also under police custody, including Ahmaud Arbery and Rayshard Brooks of Georgia, Elijah McClain of Colorado, and Breonna Taylor of Kentucky. In addition, the video reached a wider audience, in view of high unemployment and the number of people isolated in their homes. It

Figure 1.1 Racial problems continue to beset America, and with unpredictable results. When more than 4,500 protests erupted in thousands of small towns and cities across America in the wake of the murder of George Floyd in 2020, Americans' attitudes toward race began to change, with large majorities of Whites acknowledging that racism, and systemic problems in law enforcement, were major issues facing the country and its criminal justice system. Stark racial disparities in income, education, and health care remain, reflections of fundamental problems in the country's politics.

Source: **www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/protesters-march-in-manhattan-over-the-death-on-may-25-of-news-photo/1247899621?adppopup=true**

also stirred the passions of African Americans and young people from different racial groups, sympathetic with the positions articulated by Black Lives Matter, fuming about the striking racial disparities in deaths from the coronavirus, and hungering for an opportunity to translate frustrations into tangible action. Over the course of the spring, the nation experienced one of the largest protest movements in American history, as some 23 million people took part in demonstrations (Chan, 2020).

The impact of the video and impassioned conversations on social media, complemented by days of ceaseless news coverage, serves as a testament to the power of political communication. It also showcases the intersection between political media and the social circumstances in which media effects occur.

News covered the racial issue, framing it in different ways, depending on the news outlet's journalistic and political perspective. Social media was on fire, as videos and tweets circulated, people shared passionate positions about racial issues, and extremist groups widely shared falsehoods. It wasn't a simple picture. Many protesters wore masks and were peaceful, but a handful of demonstrators destroyed property and set fires. Some police visibly supported Black Lives Matter, whereas many others kicked and brutalized protesters.

Surprisingly, polls—a key aspect of the political communication nexus—showed there was more unanimity than usual. A majority of Americans strongly disapproved of the Minneapolis police officers' actions and said the police were more likely to use excessive force against Blacks (Skelley, 2020). Seventy-one percent of Whites acknowledged that racism and discrimination were big problems facing the country. About 70 percent of people believed the killing was part of a more substantial problem with law enforcement, and more than three-fourths of the public said the protesters' anger was justified (Edmondson & Fandos, 2020; Russonello, 2020). Even attitudes toward the controversial activist group Black Lives Matter changed. For the first time ever, a majority of the public supported Black Lives Matter (up to 52 percent from 42 percent a month-and-a-half earlier; Edsall, 2020a).

When you probed deeper, you found the usual fissures. More than eight in ten Democrats were more concerned about policing that caused Floyd's death than the protests, while about five in ten Republicans held the opposite view (Lerer & Umhoefer, 2020). Many Americans disapproved of the violent protests, and support for Black Lives Matter dropped dramatically over the summer months, although a majority still endorsed the movement (Thomas & Horowitz, 2020). Yet by March 2021, trust in Black Lives Matter had declined among both Blacks and Whites, triggered by animus toward the proposal to defund the police (Blow, 2021). Evaluations of the movement varied, undoubtedly as a function of partisan sentiments, old-fashioned racial prejudice, and the particular media outlets where people obtained their information (e.g., Stamps & Mastro, 2020).

Yet to many African Americans, the problems of systemic disparities—in both Blacks' deaths from police violence and long-festering health conditions—remained. The color line continued to roil America more than a century after Du Bois uttered his prophecy.

Unfortunately, there is more: more problems on different levels that raise concerns about politics, democracy, and political communication.

2. Fake News Has Snowballed

Like everything else in politics and journalism, fake news has roots in the past. It dates at least as far back as 1835, when *The New York Sun* ran stories that described spectacular revelations of an ingenious race of strange, winged creatures who looked like human beings, averaging just four feet in height, and lived on the moon in temples they created. New Yorkers could not get the moon hoax stories fast enough; it was the only topic they talked about. But the stories were false, the facts were fake, and the only thing that was true was the stories sold newspapers, plenty of them.

In the political arena, fake news—false information dressed up as news in an effort to spread disinformation—has been a favorite government propaganda technique for decades. Governments—Nazi Germany and Russia, among many—have spread fake news for years; the U.S. too has circulated faux information to prop up regimes abroad. But the quantity of disinformation does mark a new normal in contemporary political communication, as online platforms spread falsehoods, partisan extremists share fabricated facts, and bots magnify these effects (Southwell, Thorson, & Sheble, 2018; Freelon & Wells, 2020; Li, 2020). We even have a more exact definition of **fake news**: "news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers," dressed up, as they are, as real news (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p. 213; Bradshaw et al., 2020).

The issue of fake news specifically, and deliberately diffused disinformation more generally, became a cause célèbre in 2016 when Russian agents, hoping to discredit Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential election campaign, posted more than 130,000 inflammatory Twitter messages and 80,000 divisive messages on Facebook that were shared by other users, reaching as many as a whopping 126 million on Facebook (Isaac & Wakabayshi, 2017).

In U.S. electoral politics, fake reports have become common, even expected, exemplified by a doctored videotape that showed 2020 Democratic presidential contender Joe Biden uttering racist remarks, and one spread by pro-Democratic operatives, taking a chapter from Russia's 2016 cyber-tactics, that smeared an Alabama Republican senator by linking his reelection campaign with Russian accounts that followed the candidate on Twitter (Shane & Blinder, 2018).

During the white-hot 2020 presidential campaign, the viral load metastasized: A right-wing radio commentator claimed the Democrats were preparing a coup against President Trump on Election Day; an extreme left-wing site falsely contended that Trump was behind a bizarre plot to kidnap Michigan's Democratic governor; and during the election's turbulent aftermath, false claims that Biden was stealing the election from Trump spread like wildfire (e.g., Alba, 2020). These messages can diffuse widely, in some cases disseminated through trolls, amplifying their anti-democratic effects.

Fake news knows no borders, as became evident during the coronavirus outbreak. In an attempt to divert attention from its initial cover-up of the spread of the virus in Wuhan, China, Chinese government cyber-operatives circulated conspiracy theory rumors throughout social media in China that the virus was created by a biochemical laboratory in the U.S. (Bernstein, 2020). Other fake news stories that circulated on social media involved supposed government plots, miracle cures, rumors that Bill Gates was responsible for the virus outbreak, and a widely circulated video, "Plandemic," that claimed a secret group of powerful people, including Dr. Anthony Fauci, had seized on the virus and a vaccine to gain riches, acquire power, or aid patent holders of harmful vaccines (Frenkel, Alba, & Zhong, 2020).

Political leaders on both sides of the aisle have fanned the viral flames. President Donald Trump, of course, made fake news famous, tweeting the term more than 600 times, using it to disparage press reports he didn't like or that criticized his policies. He called journalists "fraudulent" and maligned reporters as "the enemy of the American people." His charge was disturbing. It is a time-honored function of the press—or news media—to hold leaders' feet to the fire, revealing information citizens need to know to make informed choices, facts that leaders would sometimes rather silence than reveal. Trump's attacks on the news media, with the fake news mantra, encouraged leaders of more than 40 foreign governments to summon the fake news specter to besmirch journalists, part of a wide-ranging, contemporary assault on the truth (Editorial Board, 2019).

Important as this is, it's useful to offer a caveat. There is scholarly debate about the scope and effects of fake news. Some researchers are concerned, noting fake news' prevalence, capacity to deceive voters, and ability to gain credence by becoming part of legitimate news stories (Avram et al., 2020; Guo & Vargo, 2020; Lukito et al., 2020; Pennycook, Cannon, & Rand, 2018; Ridout & Fowler, 2018). Others cite evidence that political ads placed by Russian cyber-operatives on social media in 2016, especially those with inflammatory, threatening language, stimulated significant user engagement via clicks (see Vargo & Hopp, 2020 for a fascinating study). Yet other scholars question how attentive people are to online political fakeries, whether they even process them, and whether they are as powerfully influenced as fake news proponents charge (Krafft &

Donovan, 2020; Keller et al., 2020). And, of course, engagement with faux messages doesn't tell us how much impact falsehoods exert. We don't have as much evidence as we would like about the *effects* of political falsehoods on the body politic. What we can say is that fake news and political disinformation are out there in increasing, disturbing numbers, making it difficult for citizens to know what to believe, and contaminating the climate of factual discourse.

3. The Growth of Ideological Media Has Led to the Diffusion of Slanted Views of Truth, Along With Lies and Politicized Conspiracy Theories

In the old days, it was simple and centralized. The main **gatekeepers**—those who controlled society's information, the organizations that decided which information passed through society's "informational gates" to reach citizens and leaders—were three broadcast networks, national newsmagazines, and leading newspapers. These informational sources were imperfect, to be sure, with biases that favored the status quo and a preference for homogenized news (Gitlin, 1980; Hallin, 1986). But they generally excluded information that did not fulfill consensual rules for journalistic evidence or played to conspiracy theories. Information frequently flowed from government leaders through the mainstream news media to the broader reaches of the public. Then it all changed, as mainstream gatekeepers lost power in the new digital era.

Over the past several decades, newspapers have been in free fall. Hundreds of daily newspapers closed shop, in the wake of readers drifting to online informational sites for news, as well as dramatic reductions in advertising. Television ratings sagged, and TV news' once-preeminent role as the most trusted medium in America, along with its decades-long reputation as the main source for Americans' news, plummeted. Power abhors a vacuum, and the air in the informational field has been sucked up by online news and social media. The overwhelming majority of Americans get at least some of their news online, often via Facebook, and frequently perused through apps on mobile devices (Digital News Fact Sheet, 2019).

In some cases, this information is false and falls under the category of misinformation. **Misinformation** is information deemed inaccurate, based on the foremost evidence available from relevant experts on the issue (Vraga & Bode, 2020). (Misinformation and disinformation are used interchangeably in discussions that follow.)

Although left-wing outlets have spread misinformation, right-wing sites have been more successful in conveying fake information to their base and, then, to the public via mainstream media (Schradie, 2019). For example, during the tumultuous spring of 2020, a study challenged the consensus, propounded by

public health experts, that coronavirus deaths were mounting, arguing instead that the mortality rate was much lower in comparison to the number of people infected. The researchers maintained (incorrectly, as it turned out) that effects of the virus were less severe than epidemiologists had projected, about as dangerous as an ordinary flu (see Bajak & Howe, 2020). Although there were methodological problems with the study, the conclusions were a matter of complex statistical debate. What happened in the politically polarized environment in which even health is weaponized was that the study became a political football, with condemnations hurled by liberal opinion sites and praise provided by conservative sites. The findings offended liberals, who, contending that fatality rates were continuing to rise, favored strict shelter-at-home policies that delayed reopening. They delighted conservatives, who distrusted the heavy-handed consensus of public health authorities, as well as government control over individuals' private activity, and pressed for government to lift stringent lockdown policies.

In a manner befitting the "no-holds-barred" media environment, conservative sites leapt into action, no less convinced the study was correct than liberals were that it was procedurally flawed. Conservatives shared and tweeted about the study one Friday morning, leading to thousands of retweets and, within hours, its publication on prominent right-leaning sites (Bajak & Howe, 2020; see Figure 1.2). Those on the extremes of both sides of the political spectrum took their cues from the spin on the study that their side applied, bereft of the more fair-minded analysis conventional media gatekeepers could offer. In this case the content, while interesting, was open to statistical question, but the science got lost in the emotional firestorm, as conservatives (it could be liberals in other cases) viewed the study in partisan terms, sharing and disseminating information that fit their point of view.

In other instances, the truthfulness of content that appears on ideological media is more tenuous, in some cases flat-out false. Social media sites have blurred the boundary between news and journalism, disseminating information that has the patina of news, does not constitute journalism, but can algorithmically and psychologically animate like-minded users.

One of the most disturbing sites is QAnon, the broad term for right-wing conspiracy theories that bizarrely maintain the world is run by a cadre of Satan-worshipping pedophiles, which supposedly includes leading Democrats, who operate a worldwide sex-trafficking cabal and plotted against President Trump (Roose, 2020). QAnon has attracted millions of online followers, including older Americans, Republican politicians, and even a community college professor, who promote its baseless bizarre claims, including the belief that because Q is the 17th letter in the alphabet, a Trump mention of 17 offered potential support for their cause. Egged on by Trump, who refused to denounce the movement, it became an established, if small, force in the Republican Party.

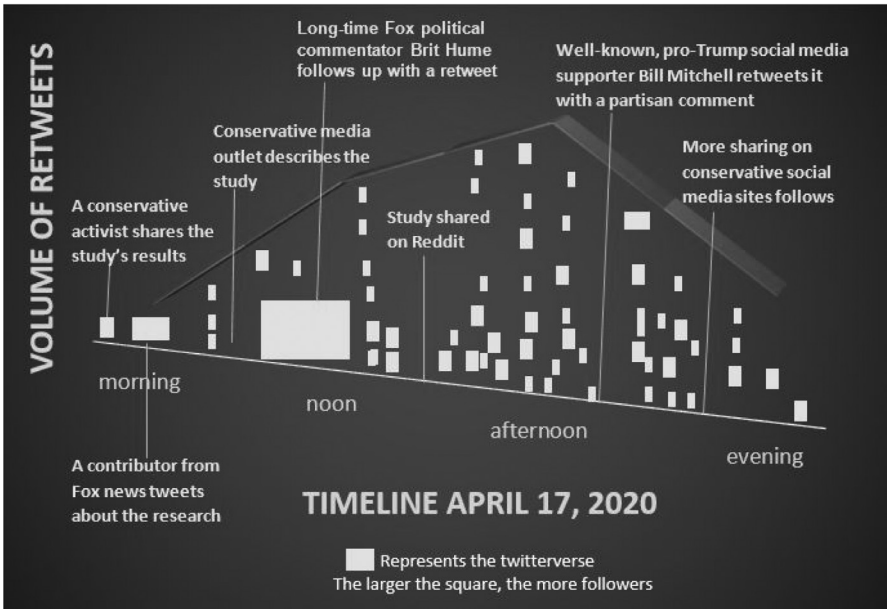

Figure 1.2 This graph traces the path of a controversy about a credible scientific study suggesting the effects of the coronavirus were less dire than projected, a conclusion consistent with conservative perspectives. As is the norm in such cases, the information spread and increased in perceived importance as more prominent conservative commentators retweeted it. A giant echo chamber accentuating the volume and significance of a supportive viewpoint built, despite serious problems with the research and the absence of views from the other side. Within hours, an interesting, but suspect, finding took on the patina of fact in the one-sided information environment of partisan social media.

RETWEETING DISTORTIONS IN THE ONLINE ECHO CHAMBER

***Source*: Adapted from Bajak and Howe (2020)**

Some have even resorted to violence in support of their beliefs, and this was before mobs, incited by Trump's tweets, ransacked the Capitol on January 6, 2021 (Barry & Frenkel, 2021). In 2018, an Arizona man was arrested following his occupation of a cement plant tower that he maintained was hiding a child sex-trafficking ring, recalling a 2016 election online falsehood that a Washington, D.C. pizza restaurant, Comet Ping Pong, surreptitiously operated as a child abuse ring led by Hillary Clinton. And that falsehood, like a bad penny or its viral equivalent in Bitcoin, never failed to disappear, circulating several years later in the form of the fiction that Justin Bieber had been a victim of the child sex ring, another chapter in the conspiracy theory dubbed PizzaGate. As of June 2020, TikTok posts, affiliated with the #PizzaGate hashtag, had been viewed 82 million times over the course of several months (Kang & Frenkel, 2020). In a similar fashion, wildly false, visually rich misinformation about

COVID-19 (and later coronavirus vaccines), fueled by global conspiracy theories, flew across the world (Brennen, Simon, & Nielsen, 2021). Conspiracy theories, while hardly new in American politics, have swelled in popularity today, in light of rising feelings of disenfranchisement that are salved by simplistic theories of blame and amplified by the global Internet.

Political leaders can make things worse, fanning the flames of false information by communicating directly with extremist followers or retweeting faux reports. To be sure, presidents, legislators, and other elected officials who convey information directly to followers online can propel activists in their party to be more engaged in politics, which is a good thing. Donald Trump, who transformed Twitter into a political communication tool, has done this effectively and positively at many times during his presidency, bringing many voters formerly alienated from politics into the electoral fold. The rub occurs when leaders link or retweet in ways that diffuse false, incendiary, or prejudiced reports, spreading false information across partisan pipelines, with uncertain, possibly untoward effects. Trump did this frequently. A systematic investigation showed that Trump's Twitter feed was awash in pro-Russian accounts, QAnon posts, conspiracy theories, racists, and White nationalist tweets that tagged his Twitter handle (McIntire, Yourish, & Buchanan, 2019).

The danger is that when information spreads in this way, it legitimizes falsehoods, muddles facts, and brings "conspiracy talk out of the fringes into mainstream discourse," fueling animus and mistrust (Waisbord, Tucker, & Lichtenheld, 2018, p. 28). Making matters more difficult for the dissemination of truth, Facebook's reluctance to police incendiary speech has allowed falsehoods to propagate (Isaac, 2020). It all reached a feverish pitch shortly after the 2020 election when social media was inundated with false allegations of voter fraud, stoked by President Trump's tweets, prompting the creation of a Stop the Steal Facebook group. Even as Twitter and Facebook took steps to flag false statements or remove hateful speech, the challenge to limit misinformation on global social networks remains daunting.

Of course, it remains an empirical question. Just what *are* the effects of fake news, false statements, and conspiracy theory reports, frequently laced with prejudice? The content is pervasive, and technological manipulations, such as those that permit video and audio deepfake manipulations, can be effective (Dobber et al., 2021). But, in general, in diverse real-life contexts, what are the influences of misinformation? Are fears of its influences real or exaggerated? Social scientists cannot assume content has effects just because it's out there, as noted earlier. As Chapter 9 notes, the effects of this incendiary information is likely to be greatest on extremist partisans, who subscribe to political dogma and distrust mainstream media (Hopp, Ferrucci, & Vargo, 2020). They then share the falsehoods, magnifying their perceived impact, and what started as a brushfire spreads, fueling serious issues for democracy.

4. Our Political Communication Environment Is More Divided, With Strong Partisans Feeding on Information That Supports Their Side

The explosion of one-sided inflammatory tweets occurs in an already partisan, polarized, "my way or the highway" political communication environment. Congress is riven by political divisions, as shown by the Senate's impeachment trial of President Trump in 2020. Unlike President Bill Clinton's impeachment in 1998, where both sides worked together on processes that could help resolve the conflict, and Nixon's case, where Republican House Judiciary Committee members voted in favor of impeachment, in 2019 Republicans and Democrats could not even agree on the ground rules, or on whether the Senate trial was fundamentally legitimate (Baker, 2019). The Democrats said it unquestionably was constitutionally appropriate, given President Trump's abuse of his office; the Republicans viewed it as a sham, designed to throw out an elected president on partisan grounds. Ultimately, of course, Congress divided on strictly party lines on impeachment. The Democrat-controlled House of Representatives impeached Trump, while the Republican-dominated Senate refused to remove him from office.

There is also political polarity in the public at large (though primarily on national issues). The typical Democrat has moved further to the left, and the average Republican gravitated more to the right over the past three decades (Young, 2020). Voters with strong positions sort themselves into social environments that mirror their politics, viewing media outlets that conform to their positions and distrusting those from the other side. Staunch partisans view political issues in strikingly different ways, as seen with climate change, where more than three times as many Democrats as Republicans view climate change as a top policy priority (Popovich, 2020). Democrats trust most national news outlets, but Republicans don't, with the exception of a few, like Fox News and Sean Hannity's radio show (Jurkowitz et al., 2020). As Abramowitz and Webster note, "large majorities of Democrats and Republicans truly despised the opposing party's nominee" (Edsall, 2018).

Partisan differences emerged with striking regularity in the calamitous spring of 2020. You saw it in masks, where staunch liberals viewed masks as essential to preserve public health, while strong conservatives felt they infringed on personal liberty. Similarly, more than eight in ten Democrats were concerned that state governments would lift restrictions on public activity too quickly, while nearly five in ten Republicans feared that restrictions would not be lifted quickly enough (see Most Americans Say, 2020; Daniller, 2020). Intriguingly, even among people who knew someone who had gotten infected with the virus or lived in a community with many infections, Republicans were less likely than Democrats to social distance (Fleming-Wood, Margalit, & Schaffner, 2020; Clinton et al., 2020). There are many reasons for these differences,

including the different values Republicans and Democrats hold toward liberty and government regulations. However, some of this results from the use of different political media. Conservative media downplayed the virus; outlets with a Democratic focus emphasized deaths and infections.

Partisanship can even extend to friendships—and marriage! Americans, especially those with strong positions, are 17 percentage points less likely to be close friends with an individual from the opposing political party and 36 percentage points more willing to marry a political ally than a partisan opponent (Mason, 2018).

American liberals and conservatives even differ in the types of political entertainment they prefer. Liberals like ironic satire, such as that dished out by Stephen Colbert; conservatives prefer in-your-face, outrage-laced political opinion programs, as purveyed by Fox's Sean Hannity and Laura Ingraham. Their different tastes in political humor are rooted in the different personality characteristics and psychological make-up of conservatives and liberals. That's the conclusion of political communication scholar Dannagal G. Young (2020), who incidentally practices what she rhetorically preaches, doing improvisational comedy at a Philadelphia comedy club.

With the proliferation of multiple online platforms for information, voters with strong political positions gravitate to outlets that reinforce what they think, derogating disagreeable information they encounter. After reading even ambivalent evidence, they end up feeling even stronger that they are right, in this way hardening attitudes and bolstering resistance to new ideas (see Chapter 9).

5. On a Broader Level, Instability, Populism, and Distrust Have Become Woven Into the Texture of Contemporary Political Communication

Political communication takes place in a broader cultural context, and events of the past decades vividly demonstrate the import of larger, macro factors. President Trump's surprising election victory in 2016 and his transformation of the communicative landscape were an outgrowth of volcanic shifts in the economic and social landscape.

Globalization, automation, massive corporate outsourcing of American jobs to Asian countries, and the U.S. government's indifference to the plight of displaced workers hemorrhaged manufacturing jobs in the United States. Across the country, and particularly in the industrial Midwest, blue-collar employment plummeted in the late 20th century and early in this century. The wealthiest got richer on the backs of the working class through stock buybacks that benefitted rich stockholders, not workers. The typical American worker is making less money today than in 1973, adjusting for inflation, while the rich are

raking it in with stock buybacks (Schumer & Sanders, 2019). In 1982 the average meatpacker made $24 an hour, taking into account inflation, but today the same worker, processing substantially more meat, makes less than $14 an hour (Editorial Board, 2020a). America's home health care aides, frequently women and minorities, can work so hard they have difficulty finding time to attend to their own families. Over the past four decades, the incomes of U.S. families with a college-educated head of household has tripled, but the income levels of families with a non-college-educated head of household has scarcely grown (Bartscher, Kuhn, & Schularick, 2019).

At the same time as inequality soared, social transformations took hold. The women's rights movement, which produced more egalitarian norms and took millions of women from housewife tedium to meaningful, well-paying jobs, inexorably changed the gender role dynamics of American families, precipitating divorces and causing dramatic increases in the number of single-parent families. These economic and family stressors, noticeably occurring in working-class households, had major impacts on quality of parenting and belief in traditional moral values, leading to less participation in organized religion, frequently a ballast against the tumultuous effects of social change. The deteriorating economic environment and diminished spirituality, occurring concomitantly with structural impediments to lower-class children's ability to climb the educational ladder, had crushing effects on many working-class families, experienced most dramatically in addiction to drugs and opioids (Putnam, 2015; Kristof & WuDunn, 2020).

These gaping inequalities in opportunities for social and educational advancement, exacerbated by feelings that elites look down on rural Americans, have produced seething anger at the leadership classes (Markovits, 2019). The political consequences, while complex, have helped fuel a return to the on-again, off-again political philosophy, or narrow worldview, popularly known as **populism** (see Müller, 2016).

Populism, scholars Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (2019) explain, is a rhetorical style that claims the authentic power in a democracy rests with "the people" rather than with specialized elites. It can be viewed as a communication phenomenon with three core elements: (1) emphasis on the hard-working, honest working people; (2) a battle against a corrupt establishment led by unresponsive leaders; and (3) a focus on how "they," the out-group, oppose "us," the people (de Vreese et al., 2018; Kaltwasser et al., 2017). Who could disagree with a philosophy that venerates "the people," one might ask? A closer look at populism reveals the problems beneath the appealing veneer.

Dating back to widespread anger against moneyed interests in the 1880s, populism frequently reflects working-class Whites' hostility toward **elites**—a general term that popularly encompasses rich capitalists who have greedily exploited

workers, government bureaucrats, political leaders viewed as out of touch with working-class folks, and, nowadays, prominent news organizations, who are seen as part of the cultural "they think they're better than us" class. Frequent targets of populism include political parties, viewed as dysfunctional; lobbyists, seen as corrupt; the news media, filled with fake news; the Constitution, regarded as a rigged political document; and cultural minorities, viewed as a threat to the people (Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Fawzi, 2019). Some of populism's anger at democracy is well-taken: frustration with lobbyists and entrenched political parties; resentment that other groups unfairly obtain resources at the expense of the working class (Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2018). However, other elements, notably rejection of constitutional norms, hard-working elected officials, and a free press, can lead to widespread rejection of time-honored norms of democracy.

Populists tend to be hostile to illegal immigrants, whom they resent, sometimes understandably, for posing a (perceived or real) threat to their jobs. In many other instances, given evidence that immigrants, illegal or otherwise, don't imperil Americans' jobs, the hostility is rooted in prejudice. Populism has a long-standing authoritarian quality that values security against risks posed by foreigners supposedly stealing "American jobs"; broad group conformity to maintain valued traditions that safeguard Americans' cultural heritage; and loyalty to "our" national leaders who promise to protect the country from looming external threats (Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

Trump famously tapped into these class concerns, with his intense language, notably arguments that blamed workers' problems on global trade deals, illegal immigration, and the "somebody is taking everything you are used to and you had" storyline, with a strong racial subtext (Cohen, 2016, p. 6; see Chapter 8).

Populism has also resonated outside of the U.S. In a 2016 referendum in the United Kingdom, a bare majority (52 percent) of voters opted to leave the European Union (EU), the union of some 27 European countries that imposes economic and political policies on all member states. The outcome was popularly known as Brexit, for British exit from the EU. The narrow vote, endlessly debated and negotiated in Britain over the next 3 years and vindicated in a general election victory for the country's pro-Brexit prime minister in 2019, was, at one level, a "stick it in their faces" pro-nationalist, populist rejection of European globalism, a cultural backlash partly rooted in nostalgia for the good old days of White Anglo-Saxon preeminence and economic security for British workers. It also was shaped by a series of dishonest and false promises by Britain's pro-Brexit leaders that unleashed economic tremors for the once-mighty UK (Perloff, 2019). Populist, anti-elite sentiments have also been on the rise in France, where masses of citizens violently protested against gas hikes and government proposals to overhaul the bewilderingly complex French pension system.

To be sure, the picture is muddied by other elections across the continent, in which anti-populist candidates wrested control. In the U.S., despite Trump's followers' strong support for his anti-immigration policies, most Americans opposed his plan to construct a wall along the U.S.–Mexico border. Still, populism remains a vital force in western democracies, a rising tide in response to leaders' indifference to the economic consequences of globalization and transparent increases in inequality (Saez & Zucman, 2019). For those who feel on the social margins, victimized by globalization, disrespected by society's elites, populism—from Donald Trump to Brexit—offers a nod of recognition and a measure of self-respect (Edsall, 2020b).

Populism has positive and negative implications for political communication and democratic government, more generally. It can encourage disaffected, economically marginalized citizens to channel their frustrations into participating in campaign communication rather than withdrawing or resorting to violence. But it has negative components as well, as when it incites prejudice against minorities, reduces support for a free press, and (in its worst manifestations) favors authoritarian leaders at the expense of democratic norms, tendencies that have all increased in recent years (Plattner, 2020; Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Hanitzsch, Van Dalen, & Steindl, 2018; Ladd & Podkul, 2019). Populism becomes fundamentally anti-democratic when significant proportions of a population support authoritarian positions.

In fascinating, disturbing research, Alexandra Filindra (2018) found that more than one-third of White Americans support having a strong leader "even if the leader bends the rules to get things done"; nearly half believe "our country would be great" if they "get rid of the 'rotten apples' who are ruining everything," and more than half agree that the country needs a strong leader who will "crush evil" and take us back to our "true path." These prejudices implicitly denigrate minority sentiments and, abetted by right-wing leaders, can push people away from democratic values. This broad-based populism made Trump's rise possible, while Trump sensed, accessed, and exploited some of its worst elements. It was a two-way street.

It all came to a crashing, infamous climax on January 6, 2021, 2 weeks before Trump yielded the office to his successor, Joseph R. Biden, Jr. Hundreds of rioters—domestic terrorists, really—stormed the Capitol effusively, gleefully, ransacking offices, destroying precious property, even smoking marijuana, intent on deliberately disrupting Congress's certification of Biden's Electoral College victory. Some had firearms and bombs, and one threatened to kill Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi. The rioters, part of a larger crowd that numbered into the tens of thousands, had gathered, at Trump's behest, to "be strong" and "fight like hell," to protest an election he had falsely told them for weeks was rigged and stolen. Encouraged, inspired, and incited by Trump's rhetoric, the group,

a motley part of his most extremist populist base—White supremacists, conspiracy theorists, virulent anti-Semites—swarmed and stormed the Capitol in a melee that led to the deaths of five people, including a police officer, as well as the evacuation of Congressional representatives until they could safely reconvene later in what was popularly called the People's House to resume the electoral certification (Tavernise & Rosenberg, 2020). It was an intersection of the worst of populist fervor and Trump's vitriolic rhetoric, the two forces reflecting and reinforcing each other in a moment that symbolized the depths of the problems wracking American democracy.

6. Our Politics Is Mean, Peevish, and Uncivil

As if this was not enough, other enduring problems plague American politics, focused on its verbal incivility. This is the characteristic of our politics that unnerves many people. Jeffrey M. Berry and Sarah Sobieraj (2014) describe contemporary political communication as "the outrage industry." Diana C. Mutz (2015) refers to it as "in your face" media politics.

Incivility is ubiquitous, spanning Trump's more than 5,000 attacks on individuals, particularly minorities (see Chapter 10), to zealous supporters of Democratic Senator Bernie Sanders, who placed snakes—emojis and doctored pictures—on social media feeds of his 2020 Democratic rival, Senator Elizabeth Warren, as well as directing death threats against well-known feminist authors who declined to endorse Sanders (Flegenheimer, Ruiz, & Bowles, 2020).

How far this departs from the ideal! The great moral philosopher John Rawls exclaimed that public civility is "among the cooperative virtues of political life" (2001, p. 117). He emphasized that "the ideal of citizenship imposes a moral, not a legal, duty—the duty of civility . . . a willingness to listen to others and a fair-mindedness in deciding when accommodations to their views should reasonably be made" (Rawls, 1996, p. 217). How unusual this spirit is in contemporary politics, where elected officials excoriate the opposition, and 42 percent of partisans in both parties view their opponents as "downright evil," with 20 percent saying they "lack the traits to be considered fully human—they behave like animals" (Brooks, 2019, p. A27).

What is incivility exactly? Kevin Coe, Kate Kenski, and Stephen A. Rains (2014) define it as "features of discussion that convey an unnecessarily disrespectful tone toward the discussion forum, its participants, or its topics" (p. 660). Coe and his colleagues classified more than 20 percent of comments in online discussions as disrespectful—and that was back in 2014! Name-calling and vulgarity are perceived as particularly uncivil (Kenski, Coe, & Rains, 2020), which is troubling given the frequency of name-calling in online Twitter rants (Darcy, 2020).

Incivility can leave an imprint. Uncivil political content and news stories reduce engagement with news, trust, and intent to participate in politics, while increasing closed-mindedness (Mutz, 2015; Young, Hoffman, & Roth, 2019; Otto, Lecheler, & Schuck, 2020; Goovaerts & Marien, 2020; Muddiman, Pond-Cobb, & Matson, 2020; Hwang, Kim, & Kim, 2018). Violent rhetoric can increase partisan polarization, even causing an increase in hate crimes, perhaps encouraging (we can't know for sure) an anti-government group to plot to kidnap Michigan's governor, who imposed tough restrictions in the wake of a surge of infections in her state (Kalmoe, Gubler, & Wood, 2018; Edwards & Rushin, 2018). Months of Trump's virulently false claims that the 2020 election was stolen from him, followed by his encouraging right-wing fringe groups to be "wild" as they protested the certification of the electoral vote, inexorably led to mobs swarming the Capitol, ransacking offices in early January 2021 (Barry & Frenkel, 2021).

Will civility return, as President Joseph R. Biden Jr. has promised? Time will tell, but the strains of incivility have been hammered into place, and incivility has become an accepted norm among extremist groups. It will not be easy to restore political decency to national politics.

7. Systemic Problems Illuminated by the Coronavirus Cry for Political Solutions

In spring 2020, as deaths from the coronavirus devastated families, shutdowns emptied the cultural landscape, and the economy cratered, crevices and fissures in American society could not be ignored. More than 25 million economic claims were filed by mid-April 2020, lines for food distribution stretched for blocks, and businesses closed due to mounting debts. The country's economic health plummeted. But problems had been building for years. The inequalities of capitalism, with its gleaming opportunities but mixed record in delivering the mythical American dream, became excruciatingly clear (Saez & Zucman, 2019).

Throughout much of Trump's term, the stock market soared and aggregate economic indicators punched upward; at the same time, unemployment fell to the lowest rate in half a century, and African American unemployment hit rock-bottom levels. However, darker realities loomed not far from the surface. Over the past decades, the income of the lower half of American wage earners increased by just 20 percent, after-tax incomes of middle-class workers rose by 50 percent, but for the wealthiest Americans, the gains have been astronomical, a rise of 420 percent since 1980, outpacing the rise in the gross domestic product and blazing far ahead of the incomes of most American adults (Leonhardt & Serkez, 2020). With blinding, morally brutal clarity, the pandemic illuminated the systemic foundational problems at the core of the American project. (To be sure, other countries suffered gravely too, casting a mirror on their own systemic conundrums, including a failure to efficiently vaccinate citizens. However,

the tragedies that afflicted the U.S., as a political and economic model for the world, were particularly salient.)

By summer 2020, the U.S., long envied by other nations for the quality of its medicine, was a public health scourge, weighing in with the highest growth of new infections in the world (Barry, 2020). Put more starkly, at this juncture the United States had 4 percent of the world's population but about one-fourth of the total coronavirus cases, and more deaths than any other country (Andrew, 2020; see Figure 1.3). In just one of many indicators of the alarming statistics, during the span of 1 month, nearly two million Americans tested positive for the virus, more than five times as many as in Canada, Europe, and three other countries combined (Leonhardt, 2020). Reflecting inequality's cracked mirror, deaths fell disproportionately on Blacks and Latinos. There were many reasons for these calamities.

Historically, Americans tend to prize the individual over the larger collective. Individuality is an admirable value, enshrining psychological growth, fulfillment, and a limitless existential "becoming." A 2011 Pew poll found that nearly six in ten Americans said "freedom to pursue life's goals without interference

Figure 1.3 The coronavirus pandemic brutally pierced the sheen of American political ideals, illuminating fundamental problems. With more cases than the rest of the world, and afflicted by the highest growth rate in the summer of 2020, the U.S. stood out. The nation's failure to take appropriate public health measures were rooted in a variety of structural problems.

Source: **www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/medical-staff-push-a-patient-on-a-gurney-to-a-waiting-news-photo/1207510948?adppopup=true**

from the state" was more important to them than the state guaranteeing "nobody is in need" (Fitzpatrick & Wolfson, 2020, p. 46).

Psychologically, American values dating back to the Revolution celebrate individual liberty, taking umbrage at government regulations, some of which are onerous, others necessary during a pandemic. With society fragmented, amplified by divisive social media platforms, America lacked shared cultural norms that, in earlier times such as the Depression and World War II, brought people together around the need to fight a common enemy. The nation's storied emphasis on individual liberty blinded us to social responsibilities we share to each other and society.

The capitalist economic system has many virtues, in terms of efficiency and opportunities it offers people to rise from rags to riches. But, with its resistance to public sector intervention, it eschewed common-sense solutions to economic distress, such as those employed by European countries, which covered as much as 90 percent of workers' wages during the early months of the pandemic (Goodman, 2020). The political economy of American capitalism has enabled the wealthiest Americans and their lobbies to exert an outsized impact on public policy (Page & Gilens, 2017). Thus, the fine print of a federal stimulus package gave breaks to retailers, big hotels, and the multinational company Boeing, but the nation's schools, which desperately needed money to make improvements protecting students and teachers, received no special provision, imperiling students and teachers as the fall semester approached (Lipton & Vogel, 2020). Congress, beset by polarization, could not find ways to pass compromise legislation to fund a cohesive plan to expand badly needed testing (Bourdeaux, Cameron, & Zittrain, 2020). The initial federal aid package gave households and businesses a needed economic boost, but partisan deadlock impeded legislative efforts to maintain the financial lifeline in unemployment benefits, putting millions of Americans in economic jeopardy, unable to pay their mortgage or their rent.

The federalist system of power sharing in the U.S., for good historical reasons, gave considerable leeway to the states, but in the case of the coronavirus the absence of a national digitized public health reporting system led to bottlenecks in contact tracing and transmitting test results (Kliff & Sanger-Katz, 2020).

Communication factors also played a pivotal role, also reflecting a failure of collective leadership. Leaders' messaging was inconsistent. Trump downplayed the severity of the crisis and claimed it would disappear; some states' governors agreed, whereas others disagreed, resulting in a confusing pastiche of information (Leonhardt, 2020; Lipton et al., 2020). In contrast, in countries where the death toll was less staggering, leaders offered more unified, scientifically informed messages. One reason for this difference is that, for all of the perils of a strong federal government, in a public health crisis it can cut through the

muck, providing a unified strategy to cope with the problems. (But it was not a panacea, as critics identified a host of problems with European governments' responses to the pandemic, a topic that goes beyond the scope of this book.)

In the U.S., the feisty, no-holds-barred vibrant media system exacerbated problems by allowing Americans of strong political persuasions to receive news that fit their viewpoints, helping some to conveniently ignore warnings about excessive partying in public. In the face of the Surgeon General's pleas to wear masks, Fox News prime-time anchors Tucker Carlson and Laura Ingraham offered up misleading information that pooh-poohed masks' importance (Gertz, 2020).

The outbreak also illuminated racial inequities that are never far from the surface, but frequently presumed to have been eradicated by affirmative action and boosts in African Americans' incomes. In 2020 the virus killed a disproportionately high number of Blacks, whose poorer economic fortunes placed them in closer proximity to others and at greater health risk due to long-standing racial inequities in the quality of health care, one of many ugly fissures in an economic system that America's political leaders have allowed to fester (Bouie, 2020; Oppel et al., 2020; see also Sanchez, 2020). Other inequities became apparent as time wore on; people with lower incomes experienced greater health risks because their jobs required that they work outside their homes, and less educated individuals were more affected by the economic slowdown (Fernandez et al., 2020). While the American economy rebounded more quickly than experts predicted, lower-income Americans, and those of color, experienced the greatest financial hardships.

The issues are not liberal or conservative, but national dilemmas that cut into the national fabric, raising questions about the sustainability of can-do American optimism. Political, economic, and cultural fault lines have emerged, illuminated by the virus. Even after the presidential election, the same inequities roiled the country. In apparent recognition of all this, more Americans said the country was headed on the wrong rather than the right track (Leonhardt & Serkez, 2020). Beset by economic problems, concerned about racial turmoil, exhausted by political vitriol, they feared the nation had careened off its rails (Lerer & Umhoefer, 2020). It's hard to disagree.

On the Other Hand . . .

Well, maybe you can contest the critics, even if you share the unhappy prognosis discussed here. And perhaps there are positive features of political communication, so roundly criticized in the previous sections of the chapter.

One of the themes of this book is that we benefit intellectually from viewing issues not from one perspective, but many. As the philosopher Blaise Pascal

noted, people do not show their "greatness by being at one extremity, but rather by touching both at once." Thus, racial animus that poisoned the country showed signs of abating, as White Americans at last recognized systemic problems with discrimination and policing. Kamala Harris, the daughter of Jamaican and Indian immigrants, became the first woman and woman of color to be elected vice president of the United States, a source of pride to millions.

The online media that have spread fake news and partisan prejudices also enabled millions of citizens to register immediate objection to politicians or policies they dislike; allowed dissident groups, such as the Tea Party on the right and Black Lives Matter on the left, to organize online; helped political candidates, from Trump to Sanders to Obama, challenge the status quo and recruit money outside the corporate funding apparatus; and provided citizens worldwide with a cornucopia of digital sources of information, which have richly expanded their knowledge and offered alternatives to mainstream news. While social media fuels animus, it also is an outlet for free expression, offering new avenues for political engagement, forums to challenge mainstream media, and ways to challenge the status quo (Barnidge et al., 2018).

Political campaigns can engage voters, as occurred with the surge in voter turnout in the 2020 campaign. For all the back-biting candidate comments, there were many cognitive virtues in the 2020 Democratic primaries. Bernie Sanders raised a host of issues, from health care to the ills of capitalism. Biden and Trump offered different worldviews from which voters could choose, presenting their differences through the realm of persuasive communication rather than coercive appeals or, as in the old days, gun duels. Climate change and racial prejudice were major topics of discussion in the presidential debates. And, despite the problems, accurate information about the coronavirus, relayed by dedicated reporters, was widely available to help people make rational choices about their health.

What's more, the foundation of democracy—voting—showed its resilience in 2020, as some 160 million people voted, nearly two-thirds of the electorate, casting more votes than in any election in U.S. history. A nonpartisan project, VoteEarly2020, marshalled volunteers to encourage people to vote before the election. Inspired by trucks with the words "Democracy is Delicious" emblazoned on the side, volunteers for a nonpartisan election project delivered some 50,000 pizzas, as well as milkshakes and hamburgers, to polling stations in 48 states (Editorial Board, 2020b). For days after the election, ballot counters, the foot soldiers of democracy, rigorously tallied votes, even in the face of anti-democratic protests to stop counting ballots. After the election, Georgia's officials defied a president, standing by their vote tabulations that showed Biden had won the state. Congress, in the face of violent ransacking of the Capitol, returned to business that same night to ratify the results of the 2020 election, certifying that Biden would be the 46th president of the U.S.

It is important to remember that negative forces have always tugged at American politics. Except for rare periods of relative political consensus, such as those that followed the Depression and World War II, partisan divisions have been a constant (Tomasky, 2019). For all the liberal-conservative polarization, partisan prejudice hasn't increased as much as some critics feared (Westwood, Peterson, & Lelkes, 2019). What's more, increases in partisanship have occurred primarily among strong party supporters, who drive the attention of members of Congress. The media focus on partisanship at the elite level creates the impression there are more disagreements among Americans than there actually are (Barberá et al., 2019; Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016).

Partisanship also has its positive features. It has encouraged those with strong political positions—those who supported the conservative Tea Party on the right and Occupy Wall Street on the left—to actively participate in political issues. Incivility is not all bad (Kenski, Coe, & Rains, 2019), as we see when politicians call out their opponents for making racist, sexist, or anti-religious statements.

Populism (until it turned ugly) provided a wake-up call to politicians of both parties, whose messages frequently ignored the grievances of working-class Whites. A host of other political movements have also gained footing among people of color in the U.S., attesting to the vibrancy of American democracy.

Today's incivility might be viewed more tolerantly when compared with the slanderous slurs—invectives and epithets—hurled at politicians and media over the years, to say nothing of physical violence, assassinations, and torching of newspapers that occurred during the 19th century. As problematic as the structural problems illuminated by the coronavirus are, beneficial things have happened too, such as incredible sacrifices made by health care professionals, gratitude paid to them by members of the public, and a perceptual focus outward to the problems the pandemic posed for society-as-a-whole, rather than an exclusive emphasis on personal dilemmas (Cappelen et al., 2020).

So, there is good, as well as bad, and this book will delve into the textured aspects of the issues described earlier, as well as touching on just what those terms "good" and "bad" mean in political communication. It does not seek to whitewash the serious problems ripping the fabric of American democracy, but aims to offer a broader, deeper examination of political issues. Besides explaining the dynamics of political communication and what ails it, the book is committed to the proposition that many perspectives—a pluralism of viewpoints—shed light on complex, contentious ideas. Yet it is important to emphasize that pluralism doesn't mean every perspective receives the same acclaim. Normative philosophies emphasize that political communication must advance democratic aims, affirm democracy's norms, and treat minority views with respect. When political leaders, media, or citizens act with prejudice or

denigrate democratic norms, they fall outside the domain of ethical discourse, and must be condemned. When mobs storm the U.S. Capitol to protest a fair, democratic election, they fall far outside the realms of tolerance and respect.

THE FOCUS OF THIS BOOK

The chapters that follow examine the complex, volatile intersection between politics and media and how it plays out in contemporary democracy. The foundation for the book is academic research in the interdisciplinary field of political communication, with its roots in communication, political science, sociology, social psychology, and political marketing. You can't cover everything in a book, and because the universe of political communication is so immense—news, political marketing, global misinformation, ads, polls, and the voluminous academic literature on these topics—I concentrate on political communication in America. The U.S. is not the only country in which political communication occurs—far from it—and it is important to conduct comparative research in other national contexts (Esser, 2019; Boulianne, 2019; Rojas & Valenzuela, 2019). Indeed, I discuss global aspects of political communication in the next chapter and call on research from across the world in many discussions. However, to provide depth and avoid superficial discussions of issues in different nations, the U.S. is the focus of the book, with attention to theories and ideas that offer broad communicative and philosophical insights.

Here is a roadmap of what you can expect. The first section, launched by this chapter, offers a foundational perspective on political communication. Chapter 2 introduces the political terrain, defining politics and political communication. Chapter 3 offers a philosophical perspective, laying out ideals of what democracy should do and how it falls short.

The second portion of the book introduces you to core political communication concepts and issues in the field. Chapter 4 describes the colorful intellectual history of the academic field of political communication. Chapters 5 and 6, focusing on citizenship, examine how well news serves democracy and processes of political socialization. Chapters 7 and 8 examine the central ideas of agenda-setting, priming, and framing, the heart of the study of political media effects. Chapter 9 delves deeply into the biased perceptions we all hold about politics and how they intersect with communication.

The third section examines communication and the electoral campaign. Chapter 10 examines presidential rhetoric and its uses in a tweet-filled, social media era. Chapters 11–13 look at the content of political news, focusing on news biases. Chapter 11 unpacks the controversial area of news bias, defines bias, and debunks a prominent myth, while highlighting the importance of political news. Chapter 12 returns to the bias issue, this time delving into the thicket of

coverage of women presidential candidates on the campaign trail. Chapter 13 discusses the issue of journalistic biases in presidential election news, as well as the role polling plays in the campaign. Chapter 14 explains the crazy-quilt presidential nomination process in a media age. Chapter 15 explores the effects of political advertising, and Chapter 16 describes the effects and normative features of presidential debates. It concludes with a postscript, evaluating our politics and offering suggestions to improve politics and political communication in America.

CONCLUSIONS

Political communication is vital and vibrant, but also vituperative, its teeming animus raising significant questions for the conduct of politics in an online age. The chapter began by describing seven problems that characterize the contemporary political media milieu: roiling racial animus and civic unrest; proliferation of fake news; growth of ideological media that offer a distorted, slanted view of truth and, at their worst, disseminate lies to extremist followers; partisan divisions that fragment the populace; broad economic and social insecurities that have produced populism with authoritarian streaks; uncivil politics; and systemic problems thrown into sharp relief by the pandemic.

Not a great way to begin a book, but alas, those are the realities.

These are serious problems, put into a broader perspective by the writer Andrew Marantz:

> Creepy surveillance, dissolution of civic norms, widening unease, infectious rage, a tilt toward autocracy in several formerly placid liberal democracies—these are starting to seem like inherent features, not bugs. The real scandal is not that the system can be breached; the real scandal is the system itself.
>
> (Marantz, 2020, p. 55)

Now, there are silver linings and good points. The same forces that have produced partisan animus have led to political change. Despite convulsive forces, electoral guardrails protected a national election in 2020. Politics has always been dirty. Nonetheless, there is little doubt that our political communication system performs well below the ideals that are hauled out on national holidays and in civics books. There is no doubt anti-democratic forces are loose in the country, threatening the fabric of the nation's storied ideals.

Is it any wonder that, on the eve of a recent Independence Day in America, just 17 percent of Americans said they felt proud when thinking about the state of the nation? (Brooks, 2020). Is it any surprise that less than half of the citizenry felt extremely proud to be Americans, and more than eight in ten were

dissatisfied with the way things are going in the U.S.? (Perloff, 2020; Baker et al., 2020). Where does this come from? How can we understand the state of American politics and political communication in the U.S.? What ails the country? Where are wellsprings of hope? These questions will occupy us as we begin our journey.

REFERENCES

Alba, D. (2020, October 29). Riled up: Misinformation stokes calls for violence on Election Day. *The New York Times*. Online: www.nytimes.com/2020/10/13/technology/viral-misinformation-violence-election.html. (Accessed: November 11, 2020).

Allcott, H., & Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social media and fake news in the 2016 election. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, *31*, 211–236.

Andrew, S. (2020, June 30). The US has 4% of the world's population but 25% of its coronavirus cases. *CNN Health*. Online: www.cnn.com/2020/06/30/health/us-coronavirus-toll-in-numbers-june-trnd/index.html. (Accessed: November 11, 2020).

Avram, M., Micallef, N., Pati, S., & Menczer, F. (2020). Exposure to social engagement metrics increases vulnerability to misinformation. *The Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*. Online: https://misinforeview.hks.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/FORMATTED_Avram_July28.pdf. (Accessed: August 14.2020).

Bajak, A., & Howe, J. (2020, May 14). A study said Covid wasn't that deadly. The right seized it. *The New York Times*. Online: www.nytimes.com/2020/05/14/opinion/coronavirus-research-misinformation.html. (Accessed: June 19, 2020).

Baker, P. (2019, November 12). Two impeachments, but two radically different accusations. *The New York Times*. Online: www.nytimes.com/2019/11/12/us/politics/impeachment-clinton-trump.html. (Accessed: November 11, 2020).

Baker, P., Branch, J., Eligon, J., Epstein, R.J., Levin, D., & Stein, M. (2020, August 30). Stories of 2020: Five lives caught in a year of upheaval and pain. *The New York Times*. Online: www.nytimes.com/2020/08/30/us/politics/2020-year.html. (Accessed: September 28, 2020).

Barberá, P., Casas, A., Nagler, J., Egan, P.J., Bonneau, R., Jost, J.T., & Tucker, J.A. (2019). Who leads? Who follows? Measuring issue attention and agenda setting by legislators and the mass public using social media data. *American Political Science Review*, *113*, 883–901.

Barnidge, M., Huber, B., Gil de Zúñiga, H., & Liu, J.H. (2018). Social media as a sphere for "risky" political expression: A twenty-county multilevel comparative analysis. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *23*, 161–182.

Barry, D., & Frenkel, S. (2021, January 7). "Be there. Will be wild": Trump all but circled the date. *The New York Times*. Online: www.nytimes.com/2021/01/06/us/politics/capitol-mob-trump-supporters.html. (Accessed: January 7, 2021).

Barry, J.M. (2020). Politics won't stop the pandemic. *The New York Times*. Online: www.nytimes.com/2020/07/14/opinion/coronavirus-shutdown.html. (Accessed: July 14.2020).

Bartscher, A.K., Kuhn, M., & Schularick, M. (2019, July 23). The college wealth divide: Education and inequality in America, 1956–2016. *CESifo Working Paper No. 7726*. Online: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3421153. (Accessed: July 30, 2020).

Bernstein, R. (2020, April 3). Investigating China's coronavirus propaganda wildfire. *The Daily Signal*. Online: www.dailysignal.com/2020/04/03/investigating-chinas-coronavirus-propaganda-wildfire/#dear_reader. (Accessed: April 4, 2020).

Berry, J.M., & Sobieraj, S. (2014). *The outrage industry: Political opinion media and the new incivility*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Blow, C.M. (2021, March 7). The allies' betrayal of George Floyd. *The New York Times*. Online: https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/07/opinion/george-floyd-protests.html. (Accessed: March 16, 2021).

Bouie, J. (2020, April 14). Why coronavirus is killing African Americans more than others. *The New York Times*. Online: www.nytimes.com/2020/04/14/opinion/sunday/coronavirus-racism-african-americans.html. (Accessed: April 19, 2020).

Boulianne, S. (2019). US dominance of research on political communication: A meta-view. *Political Communication*, *36*, 660–665.

Bourdeaux, M., Cameron, B., & Zittrain, J. (2020, July 16). Testing is on the brink of paralysis. That's very bad news. *The New York Times*. Online: www.nytimes.com/2020/07/16/opinion/coronavirus-testing-us.html. (Accessed: November 11, 2020).

Bradshaw, S., Howard, P.N., Kollanyi, B., & Neudert, L-M. (2020). Sowing and automation of political news and information over social media in the United States, 2016–2018. *Political Communication*, *37*, 173–193.

Brennen, J.S., Simon, F.M., & Nielsen, R.K. (2021). Beyond (mis)representation: Visuals in COVID-19 misinformation. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *26*, 277–299.

Brooks, D. (2019, March 19). Cory Booker finds his moment. *The New York Times*, A27.

Brooks, D. (2020, July 2). The national humiliation we need. *The New York Times*. Online: www.nytimes.com/2020/07/02/opinion/coronavirus-july-4.html. (Accessed: July 3, 2020).

Cappelen, A.W., Falch, R., Sorensen, E.O., Tungodden, B., & Wezerek, G. (2020, April 16). What do you owe your neighbor? The pandemic might change your answer. *The New York Times*. Online: www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/04/16/opinion/coronavirus-inequality-solidarity-poll.html. (Accessed: April 19, 2020).

Chan, M. (2020, September 21, 28). The price of protest. *Time*, 56–61.

Clinton, J., Cohen, J., Lapinski, J.S., & Trussler, M. (2020, June 22). *Partisan pandemic: How partisanship and public health concerns affect individuals' social distancing during COVID-19*. Online: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3633934. (Accessed: July 8, 2020).

Coe, K., Kenski, K., & Rains, S.A. (2014). Online and uncivil? Patterns and determinants of incivility in newspaper website comments. *Journal of Communication*, *64*, 658–679.

Cohen, R. (2016, September 11). We need "somebody spectacular". *The New York Times* (Sunday Review), 1, 6–7.

Daniller, A. (2020, May 7). *Americans remain concerned that states will lift restrictions too quickly, but partisan differences widen*. Pew Research Center (FactTank: News in the Numbers). Online: www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/05/07/americans-remain-concerned-that-states-will-lift-restrictions-too-quickly-but-partisan-differences-widen/ (Accessed: May 20, 2020).

Darcy, O. (2020, July 14). Controversial opinion writer Bari Weiss resigns from *The New York Times*, blasting paper for "illiberal" environment. *CNN Business*. Online:

www.cnn.com/2020/07/14/media/bari-weiss-resigns-new-york-times/index.html. (Accessed: July 14.2020).

de Vreese, C.H., Esser, F., Aalberg, T., Reinemann, C., & Stanyer, J. (2018). Populism as an expression of political communication content and style: A new perspective. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *23*, 423–438.

Digital News Fact Sheet (2019, July 23). *Pew Research Center: Journalism & Media*. Online: https://www.journalism.org/fact-sheet/digital-news/ (Accessed: March 16, 2021).

Dobber, T., Metoui, N., Trilling, D., Helberger, N., & de Vreese, C.H. (2021). Do (microtargeted) deepfakes have real effects on political attitudes? *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *26*, 69–91.

Eatwell, R., & Goodwin, M. (2018). *National populism: The revolt against liberal democracy*. New Orleans: Pelican.

Editorial Board (2019, November 30). Editorial: Fake news. *The New York Times*. Online: www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/11/30/opinion/editorials/fake-news.html. (Accessed: September 29, 2020).

Editorial Board (2020a, June 24). The jobs we need. *The New York Times* (Sunday Review). Online: www.nytimes.com/2020/06/24/opinion/sunday/income-wealth-inequality-america.html. (Accessed: July 5, 2020).

Editorial Board (2020b, November 3). Feel inspired, America. *The New York Times*. Online: www.nytimes.com/2020/11/03/opinion/volunteers-election-2020.html. (Accessed: November 4, 2020).

Edmondson, C., & Fandos, N. (2020, June 9). G.O.P. scrambles to respond to public demands for police overhaul. *The New York Times*. Online: www.nytimes.com/2020/06/09/us/politics/republicans-police-reform.html. (Accessed: June 10, 2020).

Edsall, T.B. (2018, March 1). What motivates voters more than loyalty? Loathing. *The New York Times*. Online: www.nytimes.com/2018/03/01/opinion/negative-partisanship-democrats-republicans.html. (Accessed: May 19, 2020).

Edsall, T.B. (2020a, June 10). How much is America changing? *The New York Times*. Online: www.nytimes.com/2020/06/10/opinion/george-floyd-protests-trump.html. (Accessed: June 10, 2020).

Edsall, T.B. (2020b, July 29). Trump is trying to bend reality to his will. *The New York Times*. Online: www.nytimes.com/2020/07/29/opinion/trump-2020-populism.html. (Accessed: July 30, 2020).

Edwards, G.S., & Rushin, S. (2018, January 14). The effect of President Trump's election on hate crimes. *SSRN*. Online: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3102652. (Accessed: October 9, 2020).

Esser, F. (2019). Advances in comparative political communication research through contextualization and cumulation of evidence. *Political Communication*, *36*, 680–686.

Fawzi, N. (2019). Untrustworthy news and the media as "enemy of the people"? How a populist worldview shapes recipients' attitudes toward the media. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *24*, 146–164.

Fernandez, M., Bosman, J., Harmon, A., Ivory, D., & Smith, M. (2020, December 5). The virus is devastating the U.S., and leaving an uneven toll. *The New York Times*. Online: www.nytimes.com/2020/12/04/us/covid-united-states-surge.html. (Accessed: December 5, 2020).

Filindra, A. (2018). *Of regimes and rhinoceroses: Immigration, outgroup prejudice, and the micro-foundations of democratic decline*. Paper presented to the annual

convention of the Midwest Association for Public Opinion Research, November, Chicago.

Fitzpatrick, A., & Wolfson, E. (2020, September 21, 28). COVID-19 has killed nearly 200,000 Americans. How many more lives will be lost before the U.S. gets it right? *Time*, 42–47.

Flegenheimer, M., Ruiz, R.R., & Bowles, N. (2020, January 27). Bernie Sanders and his internet army. *The New York Times*. Online: www.nytimes.com/2020/01/27/us/politics/bernie-sanders-internet-supporters-2020.html. (Accessed: November 11, 2020).

Fleming-Wood, B., Margalit, Y., & Schaffner, B. (2020, June 21). The emergent partisan gap in social distancing. *Data for Progress*. Online: www.dataforprogress.org/blog/2020/6/21/the-emergent-partisan-gap-in-social-distancing. (Accessed: June 27, 2020).

Freelon, D., & Wells, C. (2020). Disinformation as political communication. *Political Communication*, *37*, 145–156.

Frenkel, S., Alba, D., & Zhong, R. (2020, June 1). Surge of virus misinformation stumps Facebook and Twitter. *The New York Times*. Online: www.nytimes.com/2020/03/08/technology/coronavirus-misinformation-social-media.html. (Accessed: July 14, 2020).

Gertz, M. (2020, August 20). Fox's ongoing attacks on masks are a public health menace. *Media Matters for America*. Online: www.mediamatters.org/fox-news/foxs-ongoing-attacks-masks-are-public-health-menace. (Accessed: August 7, 2020).

Gitlin, T. (1980). *The whole world is watching: Mass media in the making & unmaking of the new left*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Goodman, P.S. (2020, April 2). The Nordic way to economic rescue. *The New York Times*. Online: www.nytimes.com/2020/03/28/business/nordic-way-economic-rescue-virus.html. (Accessed: July 31, 2020).

Goovaerts, I., & Marien, S. (2020). Uncivil communication and simplistic argumentation: Decreasing political trust, increasing persuasive power? *Political Communication*, *37*, 768–788.

Guo, L., & Vargo, C. (2020). "Fake news" and emerging online media ecosystem: An integrated intermedia agenda-setting analysis of the 2016 U.S. presidential election. *Communication Research*, *47*, 178–200.

Hallin, D. (1986). *The "uncensored war": Media and Vietnam*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Hameleers, M., Bos, L., & de Vreese, C.H. (2018). Selective exposure to populist communication: How attitudinal congruence drives the effects of populist attributions of blame. *Journal of Communication*, *68*, 51–74.

Hanitzsch, T., Van Dalen, A., & Steindl, N. (2018). Caught in the nexus: A comparative and longitudinal analysis of public trust in the press. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *23*, 3–23.

Hannah-Jones, N. (2020, June 26). It is time for reparations. *The New York Times Magazine*. Online: www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/06/24/magazine/reparations-slavery.html. (Accessed: June 28, 2020).

Herndon, A.W. (2021, January 8). America in 2021: Racial progress in the south, a White mob in the Capitol. *The New York Times*. Online: www.nytimes.com/2021/01/08/us/politics/trump-georgia-capitol-racism.html. (Accessed: January 9, 2021).

Hopp, T., Ferrucci, P., & Vargo, C.J. (2020). Why do people share ideologically extreme, false, and misleading content on social media? A self-report and trace data-based

analysis of countermedia content dissemination on Facebook and Twitter. *Human Communication Research*, *46*, 357–384.

Hwang, H., Kim, Y., & Kim, Y. (2018). Influence of discussion incivility on deliberation: An examination of the mediating role of moral indignation. *Communication Research*, *45*, 213–240.

Isaac, M. (2020, July 8). Facebook's decisions were "setbacks for civil rights," audit finds. *The New York Times*. Online: www.nytimes.com/2020/07/08/technology/facebook-civil-rights- audit.html/ (Accessed: July 9, 2020).

Isaac, M., & Wakabayashi, D. (2017, October 31). Broad reach of campaign by Russians is disclosed. *The New York Times*, B1, B3.

Jurkowitz, M., Mitchell, A., Shearer, E., & Walker, M. (2020, January 24). *U.S. media polarization and the 2020 election: A nation divided*. Pew Research Center (Journalism & Media). Online: www.journalism.org/2020/01/24/u-s-media-polarization-and-the-2020-election-a-nation-divided/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=newsletter_axiosam&stream=top. (Accessed: March 21, 2020).

Kalmoe, N.P., Gubler, J.R., & Wood, D.A. (2018). Toward conflict or compromise? How violent metaphors polarize partisan issue attitudes. *Political Communication*, *35,* 333–352.

Kaltwasser, C.R., Taggart, P.A., Espejo, P.O., & Ostiguy, P. (Eds.). (2017). *The Oxford handbook of populism*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Kang, C., & Frenkel, S. (2020, June 27). "PizzaGate" conspiracy theory thrives anew in the TikTok era. *The New York Times*. Online: www.nytimes.com/2020/06/27/technology/pizzagate-justin-bieber-qanon-tiktok.html. (Accessed: June 28, 2020).

Keller, F.B., Schoch, D., Stier, S., & Yang, J. (2020). Political astroturfing on Twitter: How to coordinate a disinformation campaign. *Political Communication*, *37*, 256–280.

Kenski, K., Coe, K., & Rains, S.A. (2019). Perceptions of incivility in public discourse. In R.G. Boatright, T.J. Shaffer, S. Sobieraj, & D. Goldthwaite Young (Eds.), *A crisis of civility? Political discourse and its discontents* (pp. 45–60). New York: Routledge.

Kenski, K., Coe, K., & Rains, S.A. (2020). Perceptions of uncivil discourse online: An examination of types and predictors. *Communication Research*, *47,* 795–814.

Kliff, S., & Sanger-Katz, M. (2020, July 13). Bottleneck for U.S. coronavirus response: The fax machine. *The New York Times*. Online: www.nytimes.com/2020/07/13/upshot/coronavirus-response-fax-machines.html?rref=collection%2Fissuecollection%2Ftodays-new-york-times&action=click&contentCollection=todayspaper&region=rank&module=package&version=highlights&contentPlacement=1&pgtype=collection. (Accessed: July 14, 2020).

Krafft, P.N., & Donovan, J.N. (2020). Disinformation by design: The use of evidence collages and platform filtering in a media manipulation campaign. *Political Communication*, *37*, 194–214.

Kristof, N. (2016, April 2). When Whites don't just get it, Part 6. *The New York Times*. Online: www.nytimes.com/2016/04/03/opinion/sunday/when-whites-just-dont-get-it-part-6.html. (Accessed: June 6, 2020).

Kristof, N., & WuDunn, S. (2020, January 9). Who killed the Knapp family? *The New York Times* (Sunday Review). Online: www.nytimes.com/2020/01/09/opinion/sunday/deaths-despair-poverty.html. (Accessed: May 16, 2020).

Ladd, J.M., & Podkul, A.R. (2019). Distrust of the news media as a symptom and a further cause of partisan polarization. In T.N. Ridout (Ed.), *New directions in media and politics* (2nd ed., pp. 54–79). New York: Routledge.

Leonhardt, D. (2020, August 6). The unique U.S. failure to control the virus. *The New York Times*. Online: www.nytimes.com/2020/08/06/us/coronavirus-us.html. (Accessed: August 7, 2020).

Leonhardt, D., & Serkez, Y. (2020, April 10). America will struggle after coronavirus. These charts show why. *The New York Times*. Online: www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/04/10/opinion/coronavirus-us-economy-inequality.html. (Accessed: April 20, 2020).

Lerer, L., & Umhoefer, D. (2020, June 12). On the future, Americans can agree: It doesn't look good. *The New York Times*. Online: www.nytimes.com/2020/06/12/us/politics/election-coronavirus-protests-unemployment.html. (Accessed: June 13, 2020).

Levendusky, M., & Malhotra, N. (2016). Does media coverage of partisan polarization affect political attitudes? *Political Communication*, *33*, 283–301.

Li, J. (2020). Toward a research agenda on political misinformation and corrective information. *Political Communication*, *37*, 125–135.

Lipton, E., Sanger, D.E., Haberman, M., Shear, M.D., Mazzetti, M., & Barnes, J.E. (2020, April 11). He could have seen what was coming: Behind Trump's failure on the virus. *The New York Times*. Online: www.nytimes.com/2020/04/11/us/politics/coronavirus-trump-response.html. (Accessed: April 12, 2020).

Lipton, E., & Vogel, K.P. (2020, May 5). Fine print of stimulus bill contains special deals for industries. *The New York Times*. Online: www.nytimes.com/2020/03/25/us/politics/virus-fineprint-stimulus-bill.html. (Accessed: July 14.2020).

Lukito, J., Suk, J., Zhang, Y., Doroshenko, L., Kim, S.J., Su, M-H., Xia, Y., Freelon, D., & Wells, C. (2020). The wolves in sheep's clothing: How Russia's Internet Research Agency tweets appeared in U.S. news as vox populi. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *25*, 196–216.

Luo, M. (2009, November 30). In job hunt, college degree can't close racial gap. *The New York Times*. Online: www.nytimes.com/2009/12/01/us/01race.html. (Accessed: June 6, 2020).

Marantz, A. (2020, March 9). #Winning. *The New Yorker*, 44–55.

Mason, L. (2018). *Uncivil agreement: How politics became our identity*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

McIntire, M., Yourish, K., & Buchanan, L. (2019, November 2). In Trump's Twitter feed: Conspiracy-mongers, racists and spies. *The New York Times*. Online: www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/11/02/us/politics/trump-twitter-disinformation.html. (Accessed: August 14, 2020.)

McIntosh, K., Moss, E., Nunn, R., & Shambaugh, J. (2020, February 27). Explaining the Black-White wealth gap. *Brookings*. Online: www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/02/27/examining-the-black-white-wealth-gap/. (Accessed: June 6, 2020).

Most Americans say Trump was too slow in initial response to coronavirus threat. Pew Research Center: U.S. Politics & Policy. Online: www.people-press.org/2020/04/16/most-americans-say-trump-was-too-slow-in-initial-response-to-coronavirus-threat. (Accessed: April 21, 2020).

Muddiman, A., Pond-Cobb, J., & Matson, J.E. (2020). Negativity bias or backlash: Interaction with civil and uncivil online political news content. *Communication Research*, *47*, 815–837.

Müller, J-W. (2016). *What is populism?* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Mutz, D. (2015). *In-your-face politics: The consequences of uncivil media*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Norris, P., & Inglehart, R.F. (2019). *Cultural backlash: Trump, Brexit and authoritarian populism*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Oppel, R.A., Jr., Gebeloff, R., Lai, K.K.R., Wright, W., & Smith, M. (2020, July 5). The fullest look yet at the racial inequity of coronavirus. *The New York Times*. Online: www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/05/us/coronavirus-latinos-african-americans-cdc-data.html. (Accessed: July 6, 2020).

Otto, L.P., Lecheler, S., & Schuck, A.R.T. (2020). Is context the key? The (non-)differential effects of mediated incivility in three European countries. *Political Communication*, *37*, 88–107.

Page, B.I., & Gilens, M. (2017). *Democracy in America? What has gone wrong and what can we do about it?* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Pennycook, G., Cannon, T.D., & Rand, D.G. (2018). Prior exposure increases perceived accuracy of fake news. *Journal of Experimental Psychology General*, *147*, 1865–1880.

Perloff, R.M. (2019, February 15). Border wall is nothing compared to Brexit crisis, and what it reveals. *The Plain Dealer*, E2.

Perloff, R.M. (2020, July 3). Do our partisan animosities portend another 1876 debacle? *The Plain Dealer*, E2.

Plattner, M.E. (2020). Democracy embattled. *Journal of Democracy*, *31*, 5–10.

Popovich, N. (2020, February 21). Rise in concern on climate, but not for everyone. *The New York Times*, A15.

Putnam, R.D. (2015). *Our kids: The American dream in crisis*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Rawls, J. (1996). *Political liberalism* (Paperback edition). New York: Columbia University Press.

Rawls, J. (2001). *Justice as fairness: A restatement* (E. Kelly, Ed.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Ridout, T.N., & Fowler, E.F. (2018). Fake news: What is the influence of fabricated stories and efforts to undermine media credibility? In T.N. Ridout (Ed.)*, New directions in media and politics* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.

Rojas, H., & Valenzuela, S. (2019). A call to contextualize public opinion-based research in political communication. *Political Communication*, *36*, 652–659.

Roose, K. (2020, August 20). What is QAnon, the viral pro-Trump conspiracy theory? *The New York Times*. Online: www.nytimes.com/article/what-is-qanon.html. (Accessed: August 20, 2020).

Russonello, G. (2020, June 5). Why most Americans support the protests. *The New York Times*. Online: www.nytimes.com/2020/06/05/us/politics/polling-george-floyd-protests-racism.html. (Accessed: June 9, 2020).

Saez, E., & Zucman, G. (2019, October 13). Taxing our way to justice. *The New York Times* (Sunday Review), 6.

Sanchez, L. (2020). The sleeping giant awakens: Latinos in the 2020 election. In D. Jackson, D.S. Coombs, F. Trevisan, D. Lilleker, & E. Thorsen (Eds.), *U.S. election analysis 2020: Media, voters and the campaign*. Online: www.electionanalysis.ws/us/president2020/section-2-voters/the-sleeping-giant-awakens-latinos-in-the-2020-election/. (Accessed: November 18, 2020).

Schradie, J. (2019). *The revolution that wasn't: How digital activism favors conservatives*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Schumer, C., & Sanders, B. (2019, February 3). Schumer and Sanders: Limit corporate stock buybacks. *The New York Times*. Online: www.nytimes.com/2019/02/03/opinion/chuck-schumer-bernie-sanders.html. (Accessed: July 5, 2020).

Skelley, G. (2020, June 2). How Americans feel about George Floyd's death and the protests. *FiveThirtyEight*. Online: https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/how-americans-feel-about-george-floyds-death-and-the-protests/. (Accessed: June 6, 2020).

Southwell, B.G., Thorson, E.A., & Sheble, L. (Eds.). (2018). *Misinformation and mass audiences*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Stamps, D., & Mastro, D. (2020). The problem with protests: Emotional effects of race-related news media. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *97*, 617–643.

Tavernise, S., & Rosenberg, M. (2021, January 8). These are the rioters who stormed the nation's Capitol. *The New York Times*. Online: www.nytimes.com/2021/01/07/us/names-of-rioters-capitol.html/ (Accessed: January 8, 2020).

Thomas, D., & Horowitz, J.M. (2020, September 16). *Support for Black lives matter has decreased since June but remains strong among Black Americans*. Pew Research Center (FactTank: News in the Numbers). Online: www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/09/16/support-for-black-lives-matter-has-decreased-since-june-but-remains-strong-among-black-americans/. (Accessed: September 25, 2020).

Tomasky, M. (2019). *If we can keep it: How the republic collapsed and how it might be saved*. New York: Liveright Publishing Co.

Vargo, C.J., & Hopp, T. (2020). Fear, anger, and political advertisement engagement: A computational case study of Russian-linked Facebook and Instagram content. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *97*, 743–761.

Villarosa, L. (2020, April 29). "A terrible price": The deadly racial disparities of Covid-19 in America. *The New York Times*. Online: www.nytimes.com/2020/04/29/magazine/racial-disparities-covid-19.html. (Accessed: June 6, 2020).

Vraga, E.K., & Bode, L. (2020). Defining misinformation and understanding its bounded nature: Using expertise and evidence for describing misinformation. *Political Communication*, *37*, 136–144.

Waisbord, S., Tucker, T., & Lichtenheld, Z. (2018). Trump and the great disruption in public communication. In P. Boczkowski & Z. Papacharissi (Eds.), *Trump and the media* (pp. 25–32). Cambridge: MIT Press.

Westwood, S.J., Peterson, E., & Lelkes, Y. (2019). Are there still limits on partisan prejudice? *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *83*, 584–597.

Williams, T. (2016, July 7). Study supports suspicion that police are more likely to use force on blacks. *The New York Times*. Online: www.nytimes.com/2016/07/08/us/study-supports-suspicion-that-police-use-of-force-is-more-likely-for-blacks.html. (Accessed: June 3, 2020).

Young, D.G. (2020). *Irony and outrage: The polarized landscape of rage, fear, and laughter in the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Young, D.G., Hoffman, L.H., & Roth, D. (2019). "Showdowns," "duels," and "nail-biters": How aggressive strategic game frames in campaign coverage fuel public perceptions of incivility. In R.G. Boatright, T.J. Shaffer, S. Sobieraj, & D.G. Young (Eds.), *A crisis of civility? Political discourse and its discontents* (pp. 83–94). New York: Routledge.

CHAPTER

2 Introduction to Political Communication

It comes down to this: We cannot talk about politics without invoking media, and we cannot understand contemporary media without appreciating the role they play in the political system. If you doubt this, consider how you learned about the 2020 presidential debates, political aspects of the coronavirus, the George Floyd protests in 2020, and the January 6, 2021, attack on the nation's Capitol. Your learning was primarily indirect, mediated, whether by Facebook, Twitter, a partisan website, a link, posted video, social media announcement of a speech, or through mainstream news, received on a phone, PC, or television.

A candidate can't mount a credible campaign for office without crafting an image, and an image is conveyed, disseminated, and constructed through the multiplicity of media. Images, alas, can be deceptive and superficial, designed to brand candidates as smart, likable, and with just enough anti-Washington, D.C. bluster to win over voters who profess to be sick and tired of—the cliché is apt and time-honored—"politics as usual." But political communication isn't just the realm of politicians. It is the domain of journalists, activists, and passionate citizens who tweet, link, and send vibrant messages all day long. It's all politics, or media-politics, or mediated political realities, terms that seem so interwoven one can't effectively disentangle them.

A recent president launched his career as the poster child of New York tabloids, which, long before the emergence of the anti-liberal-elite Fox News brand, uniquely appealed to disaffected working-class Americans. The tabloids helped create the media marriage between the billionaire Trump and working-class readers, planting a seed of populism before it fully blossomed in 2016. "Tabloid media played a central role in building the foundations of Trump's political identity," Geoffrey Baym (2019) observed, in a perceptive analysis of the 45th president, who, as far back as the 1990s, proclaimed that "the show is *Trump*" (pp. 396, 406). Trump's image as a self-made, devil-may-care celebrity real estate builder, who refused to let effete liberal institutions stand in the way of

his unrestrained libido, resonated with the mythic values of many blue-collar Americans. Far from serving as Trump's detractor, the media he castigated as president co-created his brazen brand in a symbiotic relationship that helped the media cultivate audiences, enabled Trump to create a fictive image, and allowed disaffected working-class Americans to believe they found a hero who would champion their cause.

After the tabloids and Trump co-constructed his image, Trump was ready for the screen. He appeared in a movie and a TV sitcom before launching a big-time reality show, *The Apprentice*. The show gave him a telegenic presence that was more exciting than the real estate deals he negotiated in his non-TV life: a tinsel brand, famous image ("coming down a gleaming escalator, an image he cribbed for his campaign kickoff"), and a platform he used to build an audience, filled with razzmatazz, messages of hope for voter-viewers, and increasingly incendiary statements, offered to a celebrity-hungry press (Poniewozik, 2019a, p. A16). Other presidents have exploited TV entertainment for political gain: Richard Nixon appeared on the '60s variety show *Laugh-In*, and Bill Clinton belted out his saxophone on *The Arsenio Hall Show* (Parkin, 2015). However, Trump was unique in that his political brand (also a media-age phrase) was inseparable from television—his creation of a TV celebrity profile, tough-guy hosting of *The Apprentice*, and symbiotic relationship with Fox News. "TV was his soul mate," observed media critic James Poniewozik (2019b). "Everything he achieved, he achieved by using TV as a magnifying glass, to make himself appear bigger than he was." He did the same with social media, cultivating a powerful, distinctive political communication style that thrilled supporters and repulsed adversaries, even as it falsely suggested he was a thriving billionaire when, in reality, he was beset by millions of dollars in financial losses (Buettner, Craig, & McIntire, 2020). Just as television saw an opportunity to monetize Trump's celebrity status, Twitter did as well, thrilled that it could capitalize on Trump at a time when it needed highly visible media stars to grow its nascent brand (Roose, 2021).

This panoply of American media-politics is viewed every day through the window of pop culture, an area with which it is seamlessly linked. This includes late-night talk shows, constant chatter on Twitter, wickedly funny conservative lampooning of political correctness, creepy, doctored Joe Biden pictures on Pinterest, T-shirts making fun of Biden's telling the president to shut up at the first presidential debate, and satirical songs—like a remake of Don McLean's "American Pie" that featured an anti-Trump refrain, "No, don't let democracy die," sung to the music of McLean's 1971 ballad (Founders Sing, 2020).

Political communication, the focus of this book, is a realm frequently lampooned (for good reason, given some of the cartoonish characters who parade across the mediated stage). People view the political communication environment as foolish, mean-spirited, prejudiced, and corrupt. There is much

truth to this view, as discussed in the previous chapter. Yet, at the same time, communication is a centerpiece of democracy, a critical arena for the diffusion of democratic discourse. In this chapter and those that follow, I will help you appreciate what may seem like a distant realm: how media construct our high-adrenaline, ego-driven, and ideologically polarized world of contemporary politics. Our aim is to understand the processes of political communication, mediated communication effects on citizens and elections, and broader philosophical issues, such as whether the media landscape advances democratic aims. We want to criticize political communication when it fails to achieve democratic ideals and celebrate it when it spurs citizens to work collectively to change the status quo.

But let's get something straight at the get-go. When you talk about politics, many people's eyes glaze over. They don't think about their own lives, but about gridlock in Washington and how Congress can't accomplish anything. Or maybe they think about Stephen Colbert, Seth MacFarlane's *Family Guy*, or an uproarious YouTube political video, and crack a smile. But—you know what?—they're wrong. Politics and political communication affect us all, whether we like it or not.

If you're a college student working full-time who lost her job due to the coronavirus, you were relieved to have received a $1,200 check from the government as part of a $2 trillion stimulus package that Democrats and Republicans contentiously debated, but finally passed to cushion some of the hardship workers faced. But with a couple of years left before you claimed your degree, you may have been devastated that your parents had trouble getting federal assistance for their business, such as a children's clothing store, while mega-corporations like Boeing and wealthy real estate investors reaped huge benefits. You may have been furious when you discovered that a friend who was nervous she got the virus had to wait 2 weeks to get her test results, but wealthy people in New York City, who had the money to sign up for medical concierge practices, got their results in 24 hours (Goodman, 2020). Politics—the lack of government-coordinated streamlined testing for all—contributed to the disparity.

If you are nearly done with college and breathe a sigh of relief because you will still be covered on your parents' health insurance until you are 26, politics provided a benediction. Obama's health care legislation let you stay on your parents' plan; the health care law was bitterly contested (and still is)—nothing if not political.

Or perhaps concerned about the senseless death of unarmed African Americans at the hands of police, you marched through the streets to protest George Floyd's death in 2020, feeling you had a moral obligation to show your disgust at centuries-long oppression of African American citizens.

Or, on the other end of the political spectrum, you may be angry that liberal critics focused endlessly on bad things they claim Donald Trump did as president rather than crediting him for his many accomplishments: record-shattering economic gains (prior to the coronavirus) and standing up to Chinese stealing of American technology companies' intellectual property. Perhaps you posted comments on topics such as these. Or maybe you feel strongly about abortion and have participated in pro-life demonstrations to display your moral commitment to the preservation of human life.

Maybe, just maybe, you are someone who has strong political interests or attitudes on issues such as these, channeling your passions to volunteer in election campaigns, or helping create the social media arm of a mayor's community outreach efforts. Or perhaps you are on the other end of the spectrum—cynical, convinced that our politics is full of vitriol and news is hopelessly biased. You find politics as it is practiced in America conniving, cunning, and at times corrupt. In either case, far from being indifferent, you have attitudes toward politics, ideas about current political issues, feelings about candidates running for office, and perhaps a commitment to exercise your right to vote in local and national elections. Politics may not be as foreign as you may have assumed.

With these issues as a backdrop, this chapter introduces political communication, beginning with definitions of basic terms—*politics* and *political communication*—and moving to a description of the key features of contemporary political communication.

POLITICS

What thoughts cross your mind when someone mentions "politics"? Gridlock? Corrupt wheeling and dealing? Bloviating politicians? Endless one-sided diatribes on Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC marked by condemnation of the other side? Nonstop acrimonious posts from dogmatic Democrats and rabid Republicans?

Does that cover it?

Notice I didn't say anything positive. That's because for most people, the word "politics" evokes sighs, recriminations, and even disgust. It has been this way for years in America. Distrusting politicians—"them bums"—goes back to the late 19th century, if not before, when Mark Twain called politicians "dust-licking pimps," and cartoonists such as Thomas Nast depicted politicians as "vultures and rats" (Grinspan, 2014, p. A19). Although democracy involves a popularly elected government accountable to the public, Americans have historically derided elected officials and even the concept of government (Schutz,

1977). Long before television shows like *Veep* viewed politicians with derision, *Scandal* focused on their venality, and *House of Cards* dramatically conveyed the lengths to which politicians will go to maintain power, humorists and writers looked disdainfully at America's politicians and the messages they deliver.

And so it is today. "It's just words," voters tell pollsters, when asked to describe their views of politics. One voter lamented that politics involves "such a control of government by the wealthy that whatever happens, it's not working for all the people; it's working for a few of the people" (Greenberg, 2011, p. 6). We say "it's just politics" when we want to deride the actions of elected representatives. But political scientist Samuel Popkin offers a different view, noting that the phrase "it's just politics" is "the saddest phrase in America, as if 'just politics' means that there was no stake" (Morin, 1996, pp. 7–8).

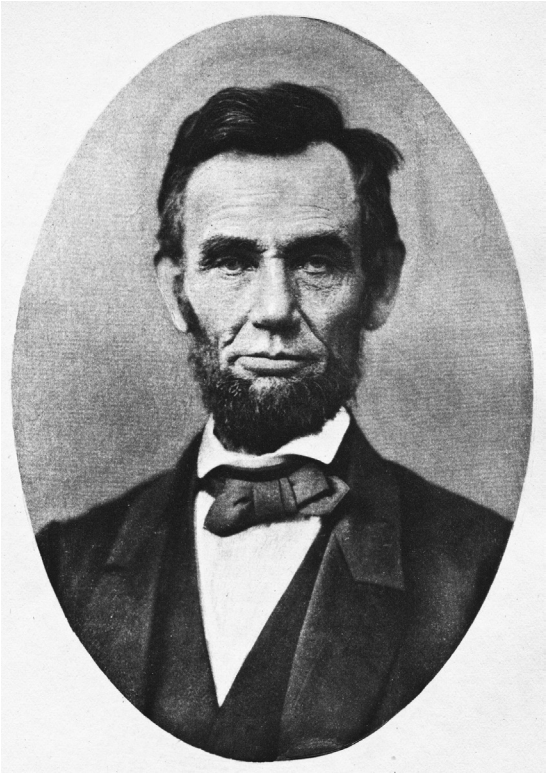

Figure 2.1 Abraham Lincoln showcased the ways politics could be harnessed for morally positive ends. He used the tools of political persuasion to convince Congress to pass the Thirteenth Amendment that abolished slavery.

***Source*: www.istockphoto.com/vector/abraham-lincoln-gm482763363-16114717**

Consider this: One of the greatest presidents of the United States was "one of the most astute professional politicians the country has produced" (Blumenthal, 2012, p. 34). Abraham Lincoln cut deals, gave political favors, and applied canny strategic skills to persuade Congressmen to approve the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery from the U.S. Constitution. When one Congressional representative indicated he would support the amendment, the president rewarded him by appointing him as minister to Denmark. Lincoln recognized that "great change required a thousand small political acts" (Blumenthal, p. 35). The Steven Spielberg movie *Lincoln* celebrates Lincoln's moral and political achievements in persuading Congress to pass the Thirteenth Amendment (see Figure 2.1).

Politics calls up negative associations, but it can be harnessed for good, as well as pernicious, outcomes. Without politics, landmark legislation on civil rights, Medicare, the minimum wage, tax reform, health care, and the $1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill would never have been enacted. Absent political achievements, the U.S. (during George W. Bush's administration) would not have invested in a global AIDS program that gave millions of African AIDS patients