



1-1-2000

## Unchained Reaction: The Collapse of Media Gatekeeping and the Clinton–Lewinsky Scandal

Bruce A. Williams  
*University of Illinois*

Michael X. Delli Carpini  
*University of Pennsylvania, dean@asc.upenn.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://repository.upenn.edu/asc\\_papers](https://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers)

 Part of the [Communication Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Williams, B. A., & Delli Carpini, M. X. (2000). Unchained Reaction: The Collapse of Media Gatekeeping and the Clinton–Lewinsky Scandal. *Journalism*, 1 (1), 61-85. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146488490000100113>

NOTE: At the time of publication, the author Michael X. Delli Carpini was affiliated with Pew Charitable Trusts. Currently, January 2008, he is a faculty member of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania.

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. [https://repository.upenn.edu/asc\\_papers/6](https://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers/6)  
For more information, please contact [repository@pobox.upenn.edu](mailto:repository@pobox.upenn.edu).

---

# Unchained Reaction: The Collapse of Media Gatekeeping and the Clinton–Lewinsky Scandal

## Abstract

In this article we use the Clinton–Lewinsky scandal to illustrate a fundamental change in the contemporary American media environment: the virtual elimination of the gatekeeping role of the mainstream press. The new media environment, by providing virtually unlimited sources of political information (although these sources do not provide anything like an unlimited number of perspectives), undermines the idea that there are discrete gates through which political information passes: if there are no gates, there can be no gatekeepers. This article is part of a larger project in which we argue that alterations in the media environment have eroded the always uneasy distinction between news and entertainment. Overall, this erosion, one result of which is the collapse of the gatekeeping function, is rapidly undermining the commonsense assumptions used by both elites, citizens and scholars to understand the role of the media in a democratic society.

## Keywords

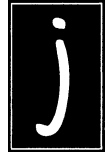
clinton–lewinsky, drudge, gatekeeping, new media environment, new news, political scandal, scandal

## Disciplines

Communication

## Comments

NOTE: At the time of publication, the author Michael X. Delli Carpini was affiliated with Pew Charitable Trusts. Currently, January 2008, he is a faculty member of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania.



# Unchained reaction

## The collapse of media gatekeeping and the Clinton–Lewinsky scandal

■ **Bruce A. Williams**

*University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

■ **Michael X. Delli Carpini**

*Pew Charitable Trusts, Philadelphia, PA*

### ABSTRACT

In this article we use the Clinton–Lewinsky scandal to illustrate a fundamental change in the contemporary American media environment: the virtual elimination of the gatekeeping role of the mainstream press. The new media environment, by providing virtually unlimited sources of political information (although these sources do not provide anything like an unlimited number of perspectives), undermines the idea that there are discrete gates through which political information passes: if there are no gates, there can be no gatekeepers. This article is part of a larger project in which we argue that alterations in the media environment have eroded the always uneasy distinction between news and entertainment. Overall, this erosion, one result of which is the collapse of the gatekeeping function, is rapidly undermining the commonsense assumptions used by both elites, citizens and scholars to understand the role of the media in a democratic society.

KEY WORDS ■ Clinton–Lewinsky ■ Drudge ■ gatekeeping  
■ new media environment ■ new news ■ political scandal ■ scandal

The Clinton–Lewinsky scandal illustrates a fundamental change in the contemporary American media environment: the virtual elimination of the gatekeeping role of the mainstream press. While most current understanding of media and politics (held by scholars, citizens, and practitioners) assumes that journalists can and/or should operate as the gatekeeper for politically relevant information, the most profound impact of the new media environment may well be the way it undermines the ability of any elite to play this central role. The new media environment, by providing virtually unlimited sources of political information (although these sources do not provide anything like an

unlimited number of perspectives), undermines the idea that there are discrete gates through which political information passes: if there are no gates, there can be no gatekeepers. While we are certainly not the first to note the changing role of journalists in this new media environment (see, most notably, Katz, 1993), we believe that the Clinton–Lewinsky scandal illustrates how fundamental is this particular change in the role of the press.

While elites (political and media both) and academics, on the one hand, have had a great deal of trouble making sense of Monica and Bill, the public, on the other hand, seems to have had much less difficulty. The former groups' difficulty in understanding the scandal stems from their failure to recognize the increasingly limited ability of journalists to act as gatekeepers. The disjuncture between elite attempts to both control and understand the scandal, on the one hand, and the conclusions which the public drew about this political spectacle, on the other hand, speaks to some fundamental changes which have occurred in the role of the press in American society as we move into the 21st century.

This article is part of a larger project in which we try to make sense not just of Monica and Bill, but of the alterations in the media environment over the last 15 years and the implications of these changes for the role of the media in American politics. Alterations in the media environment have eroded the always uneasy distinction between news and entertainment. Overall, this erosion, one result of which is the collapse of the gatekeeping function, is rapidly undermining the commonsense assumptions used by both elites, citizens and scholars to understand the role of the media in a democratic society. As scholars and citizens ourselves, we are divided over the implications of these changes for the state of American democracy. Optimistically, we believe that the erosion of elite gatekeeping and the emergence of multiple axes of information provide new opportunities for citizens to challenge elite control of political issues. Pessimistically, we are skeptical of the abilities of ordinary citizens to make use of these opportunities and suspicious of the degree to which even multiple axes of power are still shaped by more fundamental structures of economic and political power.

In this article, we try to avoid the twin pitfalls of either seeing these changes as so profound and revolutionary that they fundamentally alter the political world, or of seeing them as incremental extensions of age-old features of politics, hence signifying nothing new. In his own analysis of television and journalism, Bourdieu (1998: 43) sees these pitfalls as two symmetrical illusions to which social scientists are prone (and which ironically are made more tempting by the desire of academics to publicize their views in the mass media):

On the one hand, there is the sense of something that has never been seen before. (There are sociologists who love this business, and it's very much the thing, especially on television, to announce the appearance of incredible phenomena or revolutions.) And, on the other hand (mostly from conservative sociologists), there's the opposite, 'the way it always has been,' 'there's nothing new under the sun,' 'there'll always be people on top and people on the bottom,' 'the poor are always with us; and the rich too. . .'

## **The theoretical centrality of gatekeeping**

To understand how significant is the erosion of the gatekeeping role, it is first necessary to show how important is this idea to extant theories of the press and political communications research. An especially influential conceptualization of the role of the press in postwar American society, called 'the social responsibility theory', was formulated by Peterson (1956). Responding to a variety of social, political, and economic changes in the postwar era, Peterson sought to reconcile the growing centralization of ownership and decreasing competition in the printed press, the rise of an inherently centralized and expensive electronic media, as well as social science research and real world events which raised concerns regarding the stability of democratic systems and the civic capacity of democratic citizens (Berelson, 1952; Schumpeter, 1942).

This new theory introduced (or reinforced) three significant conceptual distinctions. First, the news media were separated from the entertainment media, with the former viewed as most directly responsible for fulfilling the media's civic functions. Second, within the news media, fact would be distinguished from opinion, and news reporting would strive to be accurate, objective, and balanced. Third, and most significant for this article, reflecting arguments made much earlier by Lippmann (1922), the public was distinguished from media elites and policy experts, with the former viewed as generally passive, easily manipulated consumers of information and the latter as information gatekeepers who represented the public's interest in the construction of political and social reality.

In essence, the social responsibility theory conceded the inevitability of both a centralized, privately owned media and of a less-than-engaged public, and transferred much of the civic responsibility of the latter to a new class of information elites. The 'truth' about the social and political world was no longer (if, indeed, it ever had been) constructed out of enlightened public discourse, but instead emerged from a more managed and limited exchange among experts in the news media. Citizens were redefined as unsophisticated consumers of information, and the public was redefined as an audience.

The ability to maintain these distinctions and institutionalize professional journalists as political gatekeepers was aided from the 1950s through the early 1980s by the relative lack of competition that had led to the development of the social responsibility theory in the first place. For example, during this period television viewers had the choice of watching one to five channels, most or all of which broadcast news at the same time. The distinction of news from non-news was also preserved by the underlying assumption that public affairs programming would be free from the expectations of profitability. And it was, somewhat ironically, maintained by the nature of the audience itself. Readers of prestige news magazines and newspapers and viewers of public affairs broadcasting were a self-selected segment of the population, a more elite social, economic, and political strata of citizens. This elite audience signaled the serious nature of the content, distinguishing it from 'popular' media. What developed were distinctions between the politically important and the politically insignificant, based not on analyses of the actual political content and aesthetic worth of media programming but rather upon the organization of producing institutions and the make-up of the audience.

Political communications researchers have wrestled with the implications of the emergence of this media formation. They have found that, consistent with 'social responsibility' theories of the press, the political agenda has been shaped by the symbiotic relationship that has developed between mainstream political actors and major news outlets (Bennett, 1988; Hallin, 1986: 115–119). In this relationship, the mainstream news media act as a monolithic gatekeeper, while a limited set of political elites vied with each other to shape this agenda and how it was framed. Within this system, the public was often reduced to a passive consumer, whose own attention to and interpretation of events was constrained by this limited information environment.

The degree to which public opinion is actually shaped by the outcome of this elite struggle has been explored by a generation of scholars. Employing a wide variety of increasingly sophisticated empirical methods, mainstream political communications researchers have found powerful and convincing evidence that the media, acting as gatekeepers, exercise significant influence on public opinion (e.g. Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Iyengar, 1994; Page and Shapiro, 1992). However, it is important to recognize that this work assumes a particular model of the media environment, described by the social responsibility theory of the press, within which elites and citizens operate. If this environment has changed, as we argue, then so too must our evaluations of this body of research: it is, perhaps, historically accurate, but of limited relevance today. Indeed, it is somewhat ironic that this model of political communication, despite its relatively brief duration (the 'golden age' of network news lasted only 20 years or so), has been taken by so many as the

'natural' state of affairs against which all other models are judged.<sup>1</sup> After outlining the changes in the media environment which undermine both the social responsibility theory of the press and the role of media as gatekeepers, we use the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal to sketch the changing nature of the impact of the media on public opinion.

### **The changing media environment and the breakdown of gatekeeping**

The media environment in the United States has changed dramatically in the last 15 years, with the expansion of cable and satellite television, the growth of the internet and world wide web, the horizontal and vertical integration of the media through conglomerates, the general availability of VCRs and remote television controls, and so forth. The new media environment is distinctive in several ways: the increased volume of information that is available; the increased speed with which information can be gathered, retrieved and transmitted; the increased control given to consumers of the media; the fragmentation of media audiences and the resulting greater ability to target media messages to particular audiences; the greater decentralization of certain aspects of the media; and the greater interactive capacity between consumers and producers of media messages (Abramson et al., 1988; Katz, 1997). All told, these changes constitute a reshaping of the media environment that easily rivals those leading to the creation of the social responsibility theory and the structural development of the media as gatekeeper.

These changes have made it difficult to maintain the always artificial distinction between public affairs and 'mere' entertainment. Specifically, there has been an erosion of the 'walls' constructed between the two types of media. The division of media organizations into separate news, entertainment, and sports divisions, while still in place, have become more porous. Journalists, management executives, public officials, and entertainers develop celebrity identities that transcend any specific genre and allow them to move freely between these different genres. The distinction between 'fact' and opinion or analysis is much less clearly identified by simple rules such as where it appears, who is saying it, or how it is labeled. Public affairs 'time slots' have become overwhelmed by the range of options open to citizens: traditional news can be gotten any time of the day through cable or the world wide web, or equally ignored at any time of the day. Even the informal standard operating procedures, routines, and beats that determined newsworthiness have come under serious rethinking both from within and outside the journalistic profession (Rosen, 1999). As audiences themselves absorb these changes and the erosion

of formerly commonsense distinctions, they too begin to move freely between genres eroding the gatekeeping ability of any single group of elites (e.g. 'serious' journalists or political leaders).

The mainstream press in its gatekeeping role operates along a single axis of influence, determined by the interaction between political elites and journalists. This point of interaction constitutes the gate through which information passes to the public. However, the new media environment disrupts the single axis system in three ways. First, the expansion of politically relevant media and the blurring of genres leads to a struggle within the media itself for the role of authoritative gatekeeper. Second, the expansion of media outlets, and the obliterating of the normal news cycle has created new opportunities for non-mainstream political actors to influence the setting and framing of the political agenda (Kurtz, 1998). And, third, this changed media environment has created new opportunities and pitfalls for the public to enter and interpret the political world. Katz (1993), for example, in writing about media coverage of the Gulf War, noted that 24-hour cable news outlets not only gathered news as rapidly as possible, but also broadcast it as rapidly as possible, effectively eliminating the role of editors in the news production process. This left viewers themselves to try to sort out what was 'really' happening as the war progressed.

In short, the new media environment creates a multiplicity of gates through which information passes to the public, both in terms of the sheer number of sources of information (i.e. internet, cable television, radio), the speed with which information is transmitted, and the types of genres which the public uses for political information (i.e. movies, music, docudramas, talk shows). These changes create what John Fiske (1996: 65) calls a multi-axiality which 'transforms any stability of categories into the fluidities of power'. While Fiske focuses on three axes of class, race, and gender in his analysis, the concept of multi-axiality is useful for understanding the changing nature of mediated political discourse more generally. So, in this new media environment, myriad gates through which information passes creates multiple axes of power to influence public opinion.

In one sense, multi-axiality is similar to older libertarian models of the press. In these pre-20th century models, relatively unfettered opportunity for privately owned presses and few limits on what they published were assumed to foster a market place of ideas. While the range and quality of information available through the press was an important element of this 'libertarian' theory of the press (Siebert et al., 1956), equally important (though less often articulated) was the belief that citizens had the ability, opportunity, and motivation to actively participate in the civic and cultural marketplace. Just as classical economic theory assumed an informed and rational consumer, so too



libertarian press theory assumed a citizenry able to sort through and draw rational conclusions from the booming, buzzing confusion of the marketplace of ideas. In addition, the libertarian theory made few distinctions between popular and elite information, between fact and opinion, between the entertaining and the informative, or between culture and politics. The 'truth' about the social and political world did not emerge from the pages of newspapers and pamphlets, but was constructed and constantly revisited through the interaction of popular information and popular discourse.

Yet, the new multiaxial media environment is also quite different from earlier models of the press and media influence, primarily because of the centrality and omnipresence of the media itself. Libertarian and social responsibility theories of the press assumed, either explicitly or implicitly, that the political values citizens use to interpret information and the information itself comes from a wide variety of sources of which the media itself is only one. Much empirical communications research (often bundled together and labeled the 'minimal effects' model) supports these assumptions by finding that the media exercise only limited influence over basic political values (as evidenced by the research on political socialization which operates through family, school, friends, co-workers and so forth) and, due to limited interest, media messages are filtered (via the two-step flow) through an attentive elite. This neat distinction between the media and life outside the media is another casualty of the new media environment. When we spend so much of our day attending to the media, be it watching television, videotapes and movies, cruising the internet, playing video games, listening to music and radio and so forth, life 'on the screen' is no longer distinct from life 'out there'. Increasingly, the media in all their new forms *are* where we live. To paraphrase Marshall McLuhan (1995: 272), 'The new media are not bridges between people and life; they are life. The new media are not ways of relating us to "real" life; they are real life and they reshape real life at will'.<sup>2</sup> It seems to us that this creates a fundamentally new set of challenges for citizenship and democracy unimagined by older theories of the press or much communications research.

At one level the collapse of gatekeeping represents a direct attack on the elites – journalists, policy experts, public officials, academics, and the like – who have served as the arbiters of social and political meaning under the social responsibility theory. To some extent this responsibility is returning to the public, as they play a more active role in constructing social and political meaning out of the mix of mediated narratives with which they are presented. We find much evidence of this in the public's ability to make sense of the Clinton–Lewinsky scandal. But in other ways, the media remain elite dominated and the changes described here are simply alterations in the rules of the

game, creating new venues through which traditional political elites attempt to shape the political agenda in new ways. How able citizens are to search for diverse sources of information and critically evaluate what they find is a troubling question. We illustrate these contradictory tendencies and the pressing need for a new theory of the press that accounts for them by examining the Clinton–Lewinsky media spectacle.

### **Sex, lies, and videotapes: a case study of the new media politics**

The Clinton–Lewinsky scandal was the last in a long series of ‘bimbo eruptions’ that had plagued Bill Clinton throughout his political career.<sup>3</sup> The declining ability of political elites and the mainstream press to act as gatekeepers along with the increasing role of alternative media sources can be chronicled by comparing the responses of the Clinton campaigns and administrations (assuming there is still a difference between those two terms) and the mainstream press to each successive accusation leveled by first Connie Hamzey, then Gennifer Flowers, then Paula Jones, then Kathleen Willey and finally Monica Lewinsky. While we focus here on Bill Clinton, it would also be interesting to analyze why allegations about his behavior became a staple of a wide variety of media outlets and American public discourse, while allegations about other politicians (e.g. long-running rumors about George Bush and Newt Gingrich) did not cross the threshold into widely circulated stories or public discussion.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, there is room for a comparative sociology of modern sex scandals and their coverage in the mass media.

Establishing a pattern that would repeat itself many times, the first allegations about Bill Clinton surfaced in alternative media outlets. In November of 1991 a Little Rock talk radio station aired accusations made by Connie Hamzey (whose previous claim to fame had been that she was a well-known rock and roll groupie) that she had been propositioned by then Governor Bill Clinton in 1983. Hamzey’s accusations were originally made as part of a *Penthouse* story about her which, by the way, also included nude photos.<sup>5</sup> Hamzey’s story was picked up by *CNN Headline News*.

The Clinton campaign’s response reflected the then still relatively intact world of elite gatekeeping. Senior advisor George Stephanopoulos deployed his ‘People will think you are scum’ strategy, later to be immortalized in the ‘documentary’ *The War Room*.<sup>6</sup> This approach relies upon two features of mainstream journalistic practice: ethical concerns over the propriety of covering the private lives of public figures and the need for on-the-record sources on both sides of a story. So, while refusing to go on the record to even deny the charges (since this would then provide two sides to the story and make it a

legitimate topic), Stephanopoulos called CNN and 'started screaming' about the propriety of the story while refusing to comment to other reporters who called. Tellingly, this strategy also relies on the ability of the mainstream press to act as the primary conduit of political information to the public. 'It worked. CNN dropped the story after a single mention, and none of the other networks picked it up. . . We'd survived our first bimbo eruption' (Stephanopoulos, 1999: 55). By 1998 and the Lewinsky scandal, none of these underlying assumptions would still be valid and such strategies would consistently fail.

In mid-January of 1992, *The Star*, a national tabloid specializing in stories about the personal lives of celebrities, published a series of stories in which Gennifer Flowers claimed to have had a 12-year affair with Bill Clinton. Again, the 'People will think you are scum' strategy seemed to work. The story was initially downplayed in the mainstream press, in part because the allegations were two years old, having been first made public while Clinton was Governor. It was also initially ignored because *The Star*, described in one mainstream newspaper article as better than most of the national tabloids but still a step below *The National Enquirer*, was deemed an unreliable source.<sup>7</sup>

However, reflecting the proliferation of media outlets, the increasing difficulty of distinguishing between mainstream and non-mainstream press and the embarrassing existence of tape-recorded conversations between Flowers and Clinton, the story would not go away. Fox news affiliates and the *New York Post* both picked up the item (being both owned by Rupert Murdoch, they provide evidence for supporters of Hilary Clinton's claims of a vast right-wing conspiracy – VRWC hereafter) and the 'big feet' press – *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Boston Globe* – assigned reporters to the story.

Bill and Hillary Clinton's decision to directly address the issue by appearing on *60 Minutes* right after the Super Bowl brought the issue more centrally into the mainstream press. Noting the significance of this very new strategy, Stephanopoulos (1999: 62) says that it was '... the media equivalent of chemotherapy. *60 Minutes* was strong enough to cure us – if it didn't kill us first'. The Clinton appearance helped to frame the issue for New Hampshire voters as a referendum on the appropriate focus of the press and politics. Despite CNN's live coverage of Gennifer Flowers' press conference the following day, at which she played some of the tapes, the Clintons had succeeded and the 'comeback kid' was born. Here we have a glimpse of the ability of the public to distinguish between the entertainment value of disclosures (in a variety of media outlets) about the private lives of public figures and their perhaps dubious relevance for judging the public performance of politicians.

While the role of quasi-alternative media was increasing, the focus of struggle still centered on the mainstream press. Even though the Clintons' efforts were successful in rallying public support and partially diffusing the

issue, the alleged affair had now gained legitimacy within the mainstream press as a campaign issue. To justify their expanded coverage, members of the press could point to the existence of legitimate sources (for example, the Clintons themselves) and to the fact that other traditional news outlets were covering the story. The press could also justify covering what was initially defined as a private matter by focusing on the issue of 'lying to the public' – a theme that would emerge time and again over the next seven years. Interestingly enough, as the mainstream press devoted more and more coverage to issues of scandal, the tabloid press 'suffered from these incursions on its turf . . . *The National Enquirer*, *The Star* and *The Globe* – each lost 30 percent in circulation from 1991 to 1996' (Gabler, 1998: 92).

At least two outcomes of the Flowers' story are worth noting. First, the proliferation of media outlets searching for political stories and using a wide variety of approaches to define what constitutes a legitimate story erodes the gatekeeping function of the mainstream press by making it more difficult to exercise any control over what is covered.

To hold the line when everyone, including its own middle-class readers, was already familiar with a story, when everyone seemed to think it was the biggest story around, would have been foolish and self-defeating. The Flowers disclosure was only the final station on this long road to conflation. (Gabler, 1998: 93)

Second, despite the sea changes occurring, journalists and political elites remained locked in a set of practices which had been defined in the social responsibility era of the press and assumed a continuing role for the mainstream media as gatekeepers. That is, throughout the Paula Jones and Monica Lewinsky scandals, journalists, editors, and political elites still negotiated with each other over the appropriateness of particular stories and the frames they would use as if the outcomes of such deliberations would still control the political information available to the public.

This pattern within the mainstream press of initially ignoring, and then reluctantly reacting to, issues initially raised in the non-traditional media was also characteristic of the Paula Jones incident. While mainstream coverage ebbed and flowed throughout most of 1994 (driven largely by events in the civil suit), and largely disappeared throughout all of 1995 (as a result of legal appeals that put much of the case on hold), non-mainstream coverage filled the gaps in this coverage, keeping the issue firmly on its agenda.

So, initial stories about Paula Jones and Troopergate, written by a *Los Angeles Times* reporter, were killed by editors until the story was published by David Brock in the *American Spectator*, providing more support for VRWC claims: Brock was infamous for his anti-Anita Hill stories and Clinton arch-enemy Clint Jackson helped sell the story. The Troopergate stories, once in the

alternative media, 'forced' the hand of the more mainstream *Los Angeles Times*, which then ran their reporter's stories (Isikoff, 1999: 15-16).

Similarly, no major network covered Jones' first press conference in 1994 held at the Conservative Political Action Committee's annual convention, nor would *The Washington Post* print Michael Isikoff's stories which largely confirmed Jones' accusations. These decisions reflected the traditional elite-dominated workings of the gatekeeping model: debates within news organizations over the public's right/need to know and negotiations with political elites over the shape and content of what's news. Of course, such machinations are based on the increasingly dubious assumption that it is only through the mainstream media that the public gets its political information.

In his own 'tell-all' book, Isikoff describes the debates within the *Post* about the propriety of the story. If Isikoff is to be believed, debate was less over whether the story was true (there seemed little doubt about that), but whether the public should know (the essence of gatekeeping): 'Editors always wanted to know these things. They hardly ever wanted to publish them' (Isikoff, 1999: 61). Another factor in the decision of the mainstream press to curtail coverage of the Jones' case were the actions of the White House. After personally arguing with Isikoff, Stephanopoulos took his 'you are scum' strategy to the next level and made a direct pitch to *Post* editor Len Downie 'over crab cakes in the dining room of the Jefferson Hotel' (Stephanopoulos, 1999: 270).

In November of 1996 *The American Lawyer* published a long story which chastised the press for its failure to explore more fully the Jones case. How do we classify *American Lawyer*? Neither mainstream, conservative, nor fringe, it is published by Steven Brill, who used the story as a way to gain publicity and credibility for the magazine (see also, endnotes 3 and 5). While other mainstream outlets did not bite on *The American Lawyer*, radio talk show host Don Imus did and the Jones story began to receive regular coverage. Indeed, one of the things that made negotiations between Clinton and Jones' lawyers so difficult was the demand by Jones for a public apology by the President that would compensate for her continuous 'sliming' by entertainment figures like Jay Leno, David Letterman, Howard Stern, and others (Isikoff, 1999: 179).

So, it was not until 1997 that the Paula Jones issue, which had been essentially kept alive for the past three years by the non-mainstream press and entertainment media, became an ongoing news story, driven largely by events surrounding the civil suit and the heating up of rhetoric within both the Clinton and the Jones camps. While in some ways this increased attention suggests that the mainstream media had recaptured control of the political agenda, most of the stories were initially generated through leaks, reports, and rumors that first emerged over the internet, from conservative publications, and/or from the cable talk shows. Thus, while the mainstream press had more

firmly embraced the issue as newsworthy (the actions of political elites – e.g. Clinton's hiring of lawyer Robert Bennett to handle the Jones case – were central to this decision), it was still reacting to an agenda that was being framed largely by others. Mainstream news sources like the evening news and the prestige newspapers were also disadvantaged by the collapse of the normal twice-a-day news cycle and its rapid replacement with 24-hour-a-day breaking news (Kurtz, 1998).

At this point in the story, all semblance of a distinction between mainstream and alternative media sources begins to disappear as Matt Drudge appears on the scene. Using the internet to publish insider tidbits about the rich, famous, and powerful, Drudge saw himself as the new Walter Winchell. This association is quite important because it reminds us, as would Bourdieu, that we need to keep the new media environment in an historical perspective and not overemphasize the uniqueness of developments. Gabler (1998: 151–2) argues that Winchell is the prototype for the journalist as celebrity who blurs the lines between news and entertainment to become a powerful force in American public life. He traces Winchell's lineage through Edward R. Murrow and Barbara Walters (who, of course, was the lucky interviewer of Monica Lewinsky). So, while Matt Drudge did not constitute a completely unique figure, his use of the internet to disseminate his 'scoops' is significant for the way it added a new wrinkle, further undermining the gatekeeping ability of mainstream journalists.

While he may have been publicly excoriated by political and media elites as the various Clinton scandals played out, he was embraced by those very same elites as the 'next big thing'. Isikoff met Drudge when he was squired around the *Newsweek* offices by editor Howard Fineman. Indeed, Isikoff actually swapped information with him about the Starr investigation because 'I, of course, couldn't let it look as if Drudge knew something I didn't' (Isikoff, 1999: 145). Fineman himself met Drudge at a dinner party in his honor hosted by David Brock and attended by '... a star-studded cast of political and journalistic notables' (Isikoff, 1999: 145). In any event, by combining the sensibilities of a gadfly, a seemingly unquenchable hunger for celebrity, acceptance, and power, and the opportunities for gaining access to a wide public presented by the internet, more than any other figure in the Clinton saga, Drudge undermined the gatekeeping function of the mainstream press and political elites. Indeed, the Agence France Presse, the world's oldest wire service, listed Drudge's breaking of the Lewinsky story on 19 January 1998 as one of the 10 key dates in 20th-century media history (Grossman, 1999).

In July 1997, lawyers for President Clinton and Paula Jones were on the verge of a settlement which would have effectively ended the Kathleen Willey and, most likely, the Monica Lewinsky scandals before they started. At

the same time, Isikoff, after being tipped off by Jones' lawyers and helped by the Clinton-conspiracy Guarino Report (more VRWC evidence) was hot on the trail of Kathleen Willey, but consistent with the strictures of the mainstream press had little faith that his story would be printed. However, Drudge broke the story on 29 July and the leak exploded the Willey story into the mainstream media and effectively ended the negotiations between the President and Jones' lawyers.

Isikoff captures the frustration of mainstream reporters, which would of course repeat itself in the Lewinsky story. Internal negotiations within the magazine over whether to publish his story reflected the old assumptions of media gatekeeping. Editors and reporters wanted to make sure that 'information would hold up *if and when Newsweek decided there was something worth sharing with the public*' (Isikoff, 1999: 234–5, emphasis added). Drudge's leak revealed the futility and out-datedness of such deliberations.

Only a few days earlier, we had no intention of writing a story about Kathleen Willey. Were we – as some critics later charged - using a scurrilous Internet gossip columnist as a pretext for publishing something that didn't meet the magazine's usual standards for what is fit to print? It was a tough call. (Isikoff, 1999: 155)

By January 1998, as another leak by Drudge aired the content of another Isikoff *Newsweek* story which had been spiked, the Clinton presidency stood at the brink of dissolution, rocked by another sex scandal and another controversial Star(r) report – this time that of Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr – focusing on an alleged affair between President Clinton and a White House intern, Monica Lewinsky. Isikoff's (1999) account of the weekend when the *Drudge Report* broke the story is a surreal commentary on the complete obliteration of the boundaries between the mainstream press and other media outlets. After losing the battle with his editors to run the story, he found out about Drudge's leak and rebuked Bill Kristol for referring to it on the Sunday television talk show *ABC This Week*: 'How could he rely on anything that guy writes? (p. 340). Isikoff wondered, 'Will the story break out into the mainstream?' (p. 341). When the story did 'break out' on Tuesday, *Newsweek* decided to post Isikoff's original story on its web-site. Here we are truly through the looking glass of the new media environment and the hyperreality of the modern political spectacle as a reporter, who knows the story to be true, rebukes those who talk about it on television because they rely on a 'bottom-feeding' source, wonders if it will make it into the mainstream after it has been on television (a medium on which Isikoff himself appears regularly – he cut short an earlier meeting with Linda Tripp to appear on Chris Mathews's *Hardball*) because it is not truly a 'real' event until it has made it into the mainstream print press (albeit the internet version of the magazine).

For all of the attention generated by the Paula Jones case, it paled in comparison to the explosion of coverage in January of 1998. The last 10 days of that month generated more newspaper stories around the country than all the articles and commentaries written on all the eruptions from Connie Hamzey to Kathleen Willey combined. While journalists continued to periodically stop and reflect on whether or not this was a topic worthy of this amount of attention, or to lament the decline in journalistic standards in reporting, they had by this time succumbed to the new system. Matt Drudge emerged as a prominent commentator on 'serious' television shows like *Meet the Press* (where he appeared with Isikoff). At the same time, journalists and news reporters frequently appeared on talk shows. Following the lead of Newsweek, mainstream publications like *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post* 'pre-published' and updated their stories on the internet. Other news (and sometimes non-news) outlets became sources for their stories. The commentary of comedians like Jay Leno, David Letterman, Bill Maher, and Al Franken became the topic of stories on the evening news and in the major daily newspapers, while the news stories broadcast or published that day were the subject of that evening's monologue.

With Clinton-Lewinsky all notions that one could make clear cut distinctions between serious and less serious news outlets, even between news and non-news genres had been effectively destroyed. Whether one started the day by listening to National Public Radio or Howard Stern, by watching *Good Morning America* or CNN, by reading *The New York Times* or *The Star*, the topic was the same. Viewers of daytime talk shows such as NBC's *Leeza* could watch a panel consisting of a Washington newspaper correspondent, a public relations expert who works with celebrities, a gossip columnist, and a television star who had gone through a very public divorce discuss the way Hillary Clinton was handling the media spotlight. An internet search under the heading 'Monica Lewinsky' would produce over 12,000 options, ranging from the latest news report to the 'Monica Lewinsky Fan Club' to the pornographic web site 'Monica Ate My Balls' (In fact, internet search engines have become one of the more significant gatekeepers in the new media environment and their operations, while little studied, hold increasing political significance.)<sup>8</sup> Emails sharing the latest Clinton/Lewinsky jokes were commonplace in offices around the country. The early evening local and national news competed not only with each other, but with the *Drudge Report* (50,000 hits per day at the height of the scandal, a large proportion of which were mainstream journalists themselves) and television tabloid shows like *Entertainment Tonight*, *Hard Copy* and *A Current Affair* (the latter two whose names had taken on interesting double meanings) for the latest details and interpretations of the scandal. Prime-time dramas and comedies either made direct references to the scandal,



or their usual fare of sex, infidelity, power, and conspiracy took on new meanings. Cable talk shows like *Hardball* and *Rivera Live*, and all-news cable networks like MSNBC, became virtually 'all-Monica, all the time'. Late evening news was no different, to be followed into the wee hours by more 'discussion' of the scandal by news anchor Ted Koppel, comedians Jay Leno, David Letterman, Bill Maher, and Conan O'Brien, and 'cross-over' personalities like sportscaster-turned-newscaster Keith Oberman. One could literally spend 24 hours a day watching, listening to, and reading about the Clinton scandal. More tellingly, one could do so without ever tuning in or picking up a traditional news source.

Reflecting the ability of the new media to obliterate both time and space, the story flowed across national borders, where it also crossed genres and audiences. For example, while 'serious' commentary in Israeli newspapers focused on the impact of the scandal on prospects for a Middle East peace settlement, commercials for spot removers on Israeli television spoofed the scandal – private detectives searching Lewinsky's closet are distressed to find a can of the advertiser's spot remover lying next to 'the' dress. Similarly, the scandal both dominated the mainstream British press and was also used in commercials to sell a newspaper's weekly job listings (a Clinton impersonator asks his aide why he should be interested in the new job listings, since he already has a job. After a pause, he says, 'Oh yeah, maybe I should take a look').

Films like *Wag the Dog*, *Primary Colors*, and *An American President*, or television shows like *Spin City*, are direct commentaries on the current state of politics, many of which have become part of the discourse about the Clinton–Lewinsky scandal. For example, when the US bombed a Sudanese pharmaceutical plant that was allegedly manufacturing chemical weapons, Kenneth Starr was asked by a reporter whether he had seen *Wag the Dog* (in which a fictional president creates a fake war as a diversion from a sex scandal) and if he saw any parallels. If he did not, Saddam Huessein did and, earlier in the year, Iraqi television broadcast a pirated copy of the movie at the height of tensions over UN weapons inspections and US threats to launch air strikes. And an MSNBC story noted that a statement by President Clinton explaining his initial concerns over ordering the strike was eerily similar to one made by the fictional president in *An American President* under similar circumstances.

And what of the public in this new, multiaxial environment? In some ways, as we argued previously, this environment is evocative of the libertarian era, in which multiple points of view exist, the line between opinion and fact is less distinct, and, as J.S. Mill (1975) suggested, the 'truth' emerges from its collision with error in the process of public deliberation. The substance of the issue aside, the ability of a nation of 250 million people (to say nothing of the

world-wide audience) to follow the Clinton–Lewinsky scandal through a host of different media and genres (from straight news to talk shows to satire), and then discuss it and the variety of more fundamental issues it raises with fellow citizens, is a remarkable occurrence. Many aspects of the internet, such as its interactivity, scope, and the ability for all users to become producers as well as consumers of information and opinion, contribute to this deliberative process. Even more mundane technology like remote controls and VCRs allows the public to play a more active role in creating their own narratives out of the already hyperreal media discourse.

In essence, elements of the current media environment give the public new ways, as a collectivity and as separate social, economic, political, and cultural communities, to *potentially* become one (or more) of the axes of power in what Fiske (1996: 7) describes metaphorically as ‘a river of discourses’:

At times the flow is comparatively calm; at others, the undercurrents, which always disturb the depths under even the calmest surface, erupt into turbulence. Rocks and promontories can turn its currents into eddies and counter-currents, can change its direction or even reverse its flow. Currents that had been flowing together can be separated, and one turned on the other, producing conflict out of calmness. These are deep, powerful currents . . . and these discursive ‘topics’ swirl into each other – each is muddied with the silt of the others, none can flow in unsullied purity or isolation. Media events are sites of maximum visibility and maximum turbulence.

Certainly the public’s reaction to the Clinton–Lewinsky scandal could be interpreted from this neo-libertarian (Fiske would describe it as post-modern) perspective. The evidence from public opinion surveys and media-market analyses suggests that the public followed the ongoing story (through a variety of media) and knew the central issues and ‘facts’. At the same time, and despite the efforts of the President’s supporters and detractors to frame the issue, a large majority of the public has created their own narrative that is consistent with neither group’s interpretation: the President had an affair and lied about it to the public and in his deposition and testimony (despite his denials). This affair (and the other allegations of sexual misconduct) has damaged their belief in Clinton’s moral character (despite his attempts to salvage his image). At the same time, and despite the concerted efforts of Clinton’s detractors, they have consistently separated this issue from his ability to govern, have said that this is centrally a private matter, and opposed resignation or impeachment, while favoring either dropping the issue or some form of censure. From this perspective, the large audiences for scandal coverage only indicate that the public found the issue entertaining and took pleasure (in a wide variety of ways) from following it, but managed to keep the story in a more reasonable perspective than either the mainstream media or political elites. In many

ways, it was precisely the undeniably entertaining and amusing aspects of this story that the mainstream were unable to address as they hypocritically exploited it:

The news journalists themselves obviously couldn't admit this. They spent the first weeks of the Lewinsky story desperately trying to justify their coverage of it by insisting that it was a matter of grave national concern. But the public knew better. With President Clinton's approval rating high and with his alleged behavior having demonstrably had no effect on his ability to govern, the public, in television ratings and polls, made two things clear: (1) they loved hearing about the Lewinsky affair, but (2) they believed the affair had no relevance to anything beyond itself. It was, in short, entertainment. (Gabler, 1998: 94)

While in the end the scandal certainly eroded the President's ability to govern, negative public reaction to the impeachment proceedings and the outcomes of the 1998 elections illustrate the inability of the President, his opponents or the mainstream press to control and shape events.

The ability of the public to participate in this deliberation without being fully manipulated by it, results, we would argue, from the media environment discussed throughout this paper, especially the declining ability of mainstream journalists and political elites to act as gatekeepers and agenda-setters. In this environment one could turn to the news (in the papers, on television, or over the internet) to get the latest facts and rumors. One could watch Geraldo Rivera defend the President night after night, and/or Chris Matthews attack him (both doing so in the context of talk shows that included guests with various points of view). One could watch the issue being described in grave legal and constitutional terms on *C-Span*, in human and humorous terms on *The Tonight Show*, or in a mix of both on *Politically Incorrect*. One could find out how people across the world interpret our apparent obsession. And one could access primary sources (for example, the Clinton testimony or the Starr report).

And yet there is another side to this new information environment. Regardless of Bill Clinton's survival and the public repudiation of many of his Republican adversaries, the ability of the administration's opponents to capture the media agenda (if not fully capture how that agenda was framed) succeeded in turning the public's and the government's attention away from other, more substantive issues, preventing the Clinton administration from taking advantage of what was arguably a very favorable political and economic climate. In addition, what we previously interpreted as the public's fairly reasoned deliberation about the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal has an alternative explanation: the attraction is driven by the same kind of morbid fascination that leads to 'rubber-necking' when there is a traffic accident. In this interpretation of the public mood, the hyperreality is more hyper than real, and

there is little difference between the public's attention to and discussion about this issue than when a particularly exciting episode of *ER* or *The X-Files* is aired. The fact that the public's reaction to charges of sexual *harassment* in the Paula Jones or Katherine Willey cases, or to alleged campaign finance violations by the Clinton–Gore campaign were similar to that expressed in the Monica Lewinsky case (yes he/they probably did it; everybody does it; the economy is ok for me; nothing can be done to fix these things; so let's move on) suggests that the current media and political environments are contributing to a rising cynicism rather than a rebirth of reasoned deliberation.

Determining which of these interpretations (or more likely what combination of them) is the more accurate is the crucial issue facing students of media and politics, as well as anyone concerned about the current and future state of democracy. To accomplish these tasks we need new perspectives on and theories of the press in a democratic society that take account of the dramatically changing media environment.

### **Conclusion: making sense of Monica and rethinking the new media environment**

What changed between 1992 and 1998 reveals much about the new ways in which politics, the media, political elites, and the public interact. It seems very clear that any approach to political communication based upon clear-cut distinctions between fact and opinion or public affairs and entertainment cannot hope to understand the mediated politics of the end of the 20th century.

The new media environment presents a challenge to mainstream journalists in their gatekeeping role as agenda-setter and issue-framer. It is telling that throughout the Clinton–Lewinsky scandal and its precursors, the mainstream press frequently paused to reflect on its own role, and to try to clarify (for itself and the public) what constitutes newsworthiness.<sup>9</sup> But the existence of multiple news outlets (cable news/talk shows, radio call-in shows, conservative publications like *American Spectator*), semi-news outlets (*Hard Copy*, *A Current Affair*), entertainment media (*The Tonight Show*, *Late Night with David Letterman*), and the internet (most notably, the *Drudge Report*), all kept the issue alive and pressured both the mainstream press and political elites to respond.

One result was the collapse of anything like a daily news cycle. While reporters still struggled to 'move the story forward' they did so in an environment where that story was being updated every 20 minutes. The predictable result was less time to reflect on what they were doing, more mistakes, and a reduced ability to correct those mistakes. Never has the trade-off between

getting it first and getting it right been so clear. While Katz (1993) noted this process for CNN during its coverage of the Gulf War, by 1998 the pressure to broadcast as well as gather news continuously had spread well beyond the cable news networks.

In short, in the 6-year period from the publication of *The Star* expose to the publication of the Starr report, mainstream journalism lost its position as the central gatekeeper of the nation's political agenda. For most of that period (at least until 1997 and arguably until 1998) the mainstream news media attempted to play a traditional role and found that the political agenda was being set without them. More recently they have adapted to the new rules by increasingly mimicking the form and substance of their competitors. In this new environment, however, it seems unlikely that *any* strategy will return the traditional news sources to the pre-eminent position they once held. The new multiaxial reality is that much as political parties lost their place as the central actor in electoral politics, instead becoming one of several sites where politics occurs, traditional journalists are now one among many agenda-setters and issue-framers within the media.

Just as the new information environment created multiple axes of power within the media, it also created new axes among the political actors who operate to shape the media's agenda. Under the social responsibility theory, authoritative sources were traditionally limited to a largely mainstream political, economic, and social elite: elected officials, spokespersons for major interest groups, and so forth. These sources, while attempting to shape the media environment in ways that would benefit their particular political agenda, understood and largely operated within the rules of traditional journalism. But the new media environment, with its multiple points of access and more continuous news cycle has increased the opportunities for less mainstream individuals and groups to influence public discourse.

As Fiske (1996), Lipsitz (1990) and others have noted, this can sometimes lead to giving a voice to traditionally disempowered cultures and classes; however, it can also, as in the case of the Clinton scandals, lead to the *capture* of the political agenda by arguably unrepresentative interests. While perhaps falling short of Hillary Clinton's VRWC claim, as we have noted earlier, from the start, the attacks on Bill Clinton's financial and sexual behavior *were* supported by individuals and groups associated with the religious and partisan right, as well as by individuals who had a more personal vendetta against the President. The religious right as well played an important role in maintaining the momentum of the anti-Clinton campaign.<sup>10</sup>

Three points are of particular importance regarding this loosely knit network of conservative foundations, public officials, private citizens, and media organizations. First, while they undoubtedly had some tacit support

among more mainstream conservatives and Republicans, by and large they operated outside the normal chain of command and often were viewed with suspicion and were publically opposed by their more moderate and/or politically powerful colleagues. This was essentially an insurgency movement by the far right that was able to influence the public agenda through newly emerging axes of mediated political power. While generally failing in more traditional institutional settings (e.g. the courts), they have succeeded in influencing the political agenda by exploiting the new media environment through first using the right-wing press, then the non-mainstream press (the internet, cable talk shows, etc.), and ultimately the mainstream press.<sup>11</sup>

The larger point is not that the new media environment favors conservative causes. Certainly the Clinton administration and its supporters have proven effective at using some of the same techniques in getting their side of the story into the liberal, non-mainstream, and mainstream press (one need only consider the concerted efforts to damage the reputations of Gennifer Flowers, Paula Jones, Katherine Willey, and to a lesser extent Monica Lewinsky, or the revelations of sexual misconduct by the President's critics). Nor is it to suggest that, for different issues, more than one new axis of power might not emerge (for example, imagine how the Clinton scandals might have played out if feminists had played a more visible, active role). Rather it is to suggest this new media environment, and the hyperreality it produces, has created new, multiple, and shifting axes of political power.

At the very least, the new media environment decisively shifts the nature of arguments about what the public has the right to know. Under the social responsibility model, such debates are matters of negotiation among elites. Political elite spin doctors like George Stephanopoulos and James Carville negotiated with mainstream journalists to keep the supposedly private affairs (literally) of the President out of the media. Reporters and editors debated amongst themselves if and when there is something worth sharing with the public. Lawyers for the accusers and the accused negotiated legal settlements that prevented anyone from talking to the press or the public. Whether we ultimately believe that the public ought to know whether or not the President of the United States exposed himself to Paula Jones, groped Kathleen Willey, received oral sex from Monica Lewinsky or not, such debates are no longer likely to remain within elite circles. Instead, debates in the new media environment will center on the ability of the public and elites (political and media) to openly negotiate and construct a meaningful boundary between public and private life; entertainment and serious political issues; fact and opinion and so forth which can withstand the public disclosure of information that would have remained hidden under earlier models of political communication.

We close by noting a fundamental objection to our argument: how generalizable is coverage of the Clinton–Lewinsky scandal for political communication in general? After all, it might be argued, a juicy sex scandal is tailor-made for crossing the boundaries between different types of media and for capturing the public's attention. We answer this argument by contending that the Clinton–Lewinsky scandal, in many ways, may actually understate the dramatic changes in the media environment. We say this because the scandal is an excellent example of a media event having the power to call a virtual 'time out' from everyday life by focusing public attention on a single pressing event (Dayan and Katz, 1994). In such events, virtually all of the media, regardless of genre, and the public discourse flowing from it, focuses on the same issue: the death of Princess Diana, the O.J. Simpson case, the Clarence Thomas–Anita Hill Hearings are examples.<sup>12</sup>

In this kind of media event, as in the Clinton–Lewinsky scandal (Dayan and Katz would distinguish between breaking coverage of the scandal itself, and the more scripted ritual of the impeachment proceedings, see endnote 12), while various media may cover the issue in very different ways, underlying assumptions about the structure of the public agenda are shared across all these outlets and audiences, whether they be the CBS *Nightly News*, Jay Leno, or a commercial for a spot remover. The more typical case, when there is no overriding media event leading to such convergence, may be a much more fundamental fracturing of the ability of the mainstream press or any other institution to define a public agenda. On such 'ordinary' days, the *Nightly News*, viewed by a shrinking and aging audience, may address events in Kosovo or the theft of American nuclear secrets by China, while a more youthful and expanding audience of internet surfers ponder the latest from the *Drudge Report* or more specifically focused on-line sites, and small segmented cable television audiences watch docudramas, melodramas, or comedies dealing with a wide range of more or less politically significant issues.

Just as elites can lose control of media events, the more ordinary daily contours of the new media environment make it more difficult for elites to focus public attention (i.e. set the political agenda). So, while the mainstream press and political elites paid daily attention to the NATO air campaign against Yugoslavia, this was not a topic of central importance on the myriad of alternative sources of political information (outlets which had paid much attention to the Clinton–Lewinsky scandal).<sup>13</sup> Indeed, one indication of how altered the media environment has become over the last several years is evidenced by the ability of the media to set the agenda in the case of the 1991 air campaign against Iraq and the failure to do so in the air war of 1999.

As a result, we would hypothesize that the public is less interested and absorbs less mediated information about this instance of the use of American

military force than would have been the case under the social responsibility model of the press or would have been predicted by extant models of agenda-setting and priming in political communications. This poses new challenges for political elites who depend upon the media's ability to mobilize the population by turning military actions into political spectacles, since the new media environment enhances the ability of the public to simply not pay attention (Edelman, 1995). Interestingly enough, one of Slobodan Milosevic's miscalculations may have been his expectation that American public opinion would turn quickly against the bombings as CNN and other outlets showed nightly shots of the devastation it was causing (Ignatieff, 1999: 75). What he failed to anticipate was that the American public would be watching, instead, stories about the Columbine High School<sup>14</sup> shootings and docudramas about Jessie Ventura, Joan of Arc and Michael Landon aired as part of attempts to attract audiences during May sweeps month.

At the very least, then, making sense of Monica and the new media environment within which she achieved her notoriety requires a more subtle and nuanced notion of political power than that which underlies social responsibility models of the press and the methods of political communication scholars.

## Acknowledgements

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the International Communication Association Meeting, San Francisco, May 1999. We want to thank John Zaller and three anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions.

## Notes

- 1 We are indebted to John Zaller for making this point.
- 2 The actual quote from McLuhan is: 'The new media are not bridges between man and nature; they are nature. . . . The new media are not ways of relating us to the old world; they are the real world and they reshape what remains of the old world at will.'
- 3 Interestingly enough, for the purposes of this paper, the phrase 'bimbo eruption' is usually attributed to Betsy Wright, a former Clinton chief of staff, who was charged with investigating and undermining the credibility of his accusers. She (or at least a thinly disguised version of her) was played by Kathy Bates, in an academy award nominated performance, in the movie *Primary Colors*.
- 4 We are indebted to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this point.
- 5 The difficulty of classifying media outlets is an interesting problem. Is *Penthouse* a mainstream publication? Fifteen years ago, the answer would likely have been 'no', especially in academic and elite circles. However, as Larry Flynt and *Hustler* threaten to 'out' the sexual escapades of conservative politicians and hence play a significant role in American politics (i.e. the rapid exit from the stage of incoming House Speaker Bob



Livingstone), *Penthouse* begins to seem positively conservative by comparison, to say nothing of the information cycling and recycling on the internet.

- 6 Reflecting the difficulty of distinguishing between different media genres, we set off the term documentary in quotation marks. For a fascinating account of the ways in which this movie is less a documentary than a new form of political communication, reflecting a carefully crafted strategy by the Clinton campaign, see Pary-Giles and Pary-Giles (1999).
- 7 Again, reflecting the increasing difficulty of classifying media outlets, *The National Enquirer's* own reputation had been enhanced and begrudgingly acknowledged by members of the mainstream press as a result of its reporting during the O.J. Simpson trial.
- 8 See, for example, an interesting critical analysis of the ways in which search engines are becoming increasingly commercialized and its implications for the information their users are likely to recover (Rosenberg, 1999).
- 9 Recent attempts by the news media to 'police' itself also point to this crisis in defining journalism: for example, the firing of several reporters and columnists at *The Boston Globe* and *The Washington Post* for inaccurate reporting; the resignation of a local newscaster in protest over the hiring of talk show host Jerry Springer; the decision by ABC to not air a docudrama by Oliver Stone about the downing of TWA Flight 800 out of fear that it would confuse viewers; the ongoing criticism of 'public journalism' by mainstream members of the press; and so forth.
- 10 The Christian Defense Coalition contributed to the Paula Jones suit by setting up the 'Paula Jones Legal Expenses Fund'. Other religious, conservative and/or Republican individuals and groups such as Gilbert Davis (who had supported George Bush in 1988), the Legal Affairs Council (which had originally been set up to help defend Oliver North during the Iran-Contra scandal), and the Rutherford Institute (a not-for-profit organization that focuses on issues of religious freedom) also pledged contributions to aid in Paula Jones' defense.
- 11 The Republican losses in the 1998 congressional elections, resulting in part from their failed strategy regarding the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, and the subsequent melt-down within the GOP leadership, point to the extent to which mainstream members of the party had lost control of their own agenda.
- 12 We are using a more inclusive definition of media event than the one developed by Dayan and Katz. They include as part of their definition that media events must be scheduled (so, they distinguish between the Kennedy assassination, not a media event because unscheduled, and the Kennedy funeral, a media event because scheduled). They include this restriction because they are interested in the ability of the media to work in conjunction with the state to bring together the entire public in celebrations of reintegration. In contrast, we are focusing on media events which, because of the new media environment, hold the dramatic potential for elites to lose control of the event and its interpretation by the public.
- 13 For instance, while an internet search under Monica Lewinsky produces a riot of different kinds of web-sites from the strictly mainstream to the pornographic, a search under Kosovo produces only a list of news stories. What determines which issues become political events and which do not is an interesting avenue for study.
- 14 In an interesting twist on the accusations that usually pass between mainstream press outlets and alternative sources of political information, Matt Drudge published an

article skewering the press for its celebrations over the increased ratings that it garnered in covering the Columbine shooting:

Late on Tuesday NBC spokeswoman Barbara Levin broke out the digital champagne and poured a press release on the wires celebrating dramatic audience increases for NBC News at the height of last week's school slaughter.

'As the nation focused on the school shooting tragedy in Littleton, Colorado. . . *Nightly News* posted double digit viewer growth in both total viewers and homes', bragged Levin. . .

MSNBC [and CNN] followed the example and issued [their] own shocking press release[s] claiming viewership records had been set during the bloodbath. . .

if only the shooting would never end (*Drudge Report*, 1999).

## References

- Abramson, Jeffrey, Christopher Arterton and Gary Orren (1988) *The Electronic Commonwealth*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bennett, Lance (1988) *News: The Politics of Illusion*. New York: Longman.
- Berelson, Bernard (1952) 'Democratic Theory and Public Opinion', *Public Opinion Quarterly* 16: 313–30.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1998) *On Television and Journalism*, trans. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson. London: Pluto Press.
- Dayan, Daniel and Elihu Katz (1994) *Media Events*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Drudge Report* (1999) 'Let the Celebration Begin', URL (consulted 7 June): <http://www.drudgereport.com/>
- Edelman, Murray (1995) *From Art To Politics*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Fiske, John (1996) *Media Matters*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gabler, Neal (1998) *Life The Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Grossman, Lawrence K. (1999) 'From Marconi to Murrow to – Drudge?', *Columbia Journalism Review* (Jul./Aug.): 17–18.
- Hallin, Daniel (1986) *The Uncensored War*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ignatieff, Michael (1999) 'Balkan Physics', *The New Yorker*, 10 May: 68–80.
- Isikoff, Michael (1999) *Uncovering Clinton: A Reporter's Story*. New York: Crown.
- Iyengar, Shanto (1994) *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Iyengar, Shanto and Donald Kinder (1987) *News that Matters*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Katz, Elihu (1993) 'The End of Journalism? Notes on Watching the Gulf War', *Journal of Communication* 42(3): 5–13.
- Katz, Jon (1997) *Virtuous Reality*. New York: Random House.
- Kurtz, Howard (1998) *Spin Cycle*. New York: Touchstone Books.
- Lippmann, Walter (1922) *Public Opinion*. New York: The Free Press.
- Lipsitz, George (1990) *Time Passages*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- McLuhan, Marshall (1995) 'Media as the New Nature', in Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrove (eds) *Essential McLuhan*. New York: Basic Books.

- Mill, John Stuart (1975 [1859]) *On Liberty*. New York: Norton.
- Page, Benjamin and Robert Shapiro (1992) *The Rational Public*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Pary-Giles, Shawn J. and Trevor Pary-Giles (1999) 'Meta-Imaging, *The War Room*, and the Hyperreality of U.S. Politics', *Journal of Communication* 49(1): 28–45.
- Peterson, Theodore (1956) 'The Social Responsibility Theory', in Fred Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm (eds) *Four Theories of the Press*, pp. 73–104. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Rosen, Jay (1999) *What Are Journalists For?* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Rosenberg, Scott (1999) 'Is Alta Vista on the Take?', *Salon* (www.salon.com) 22 April.
- Schumpeter, Joseph (1942) *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Siebert, Fred, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm (1956) *Four Theories of the Press*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Stephanopoulos, George (1999) *All Too Human: A Political Education*. Boston: Little, Brown.

## Biographical notes

**Bruce A. Williams** is a Research Professor in the Institute of Communications Research at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His most recent book is *Democracy, Dialogue and Environmental Disputes: The Contested Languages of Social Regulation* (with Albert R. Matheny).

*Address:* Institute of Communications Research, 222B Armory Building, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Champaign, IL 61820, USA.

[email: brucewm@staff.uiuc.edu]

**Michael X. Delli Carpini** is with the Pew Charitable Trusts and has taught at Barnard College/Columbia University and Rutgers University. His most recent book is *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters* (with Scott Keeter).

*Address:* Pew Charitable Trusts, One Commerce Square, 2005 Market Street, Suite 1700, Philadelphia, PA 19103, USA. [email: mdellicarpini@pewtrusts.com]