

Books: 'Media Politics: A Citizen's Guide'

Shanto Iyengar

Director of the Political Communication Lab, Stanford University

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Shanto Iyengar, director of the Political Communication Lab at Stanford University, was online **Thursday, Nov. 30, at noon ET** to discuss his new book, "**Media Politics: A Citizen's Guide**" (with Jennifer A. McGrady), and the role of image in American politics.

"Media Politics" examines the impact of increasing media coverage and debate on politicians and the policy-making process. The phenomenon of "media-based politics" creates an atmosphere where public relations strategy and ill-informed public opinion often affect the way social and economic problems are addressed.

The transcript follows.

Southbury, Conn.: Do you think it was appropriate for NBC to start calling the war in Iraq, a civil war?

Shanto Iyengar: This seems to be a question of semantics - is "civil war" worse than "chaos?" Clearly, the administration would prefer that the situation not be characterized as a civil war and in this sense, I'd say NBC was engaging in a form of adversarial journalism.

Washington, D.C.: I am sure I read a few days ago that Bush, in the same breath denying there is a Civil War going on in Iraq, also attributed the "new phase" of violence, not to age-old Sunni and Shiite hatreds, but to al Qaeda. What I haven't seen much of if any is political journalists or pundits calling Bush on his attribution. Why does The Post for example let Bush get away with such a claim instead of examining the demagoguery involved?

Shanto Iyengar: It is difficult for the press to "rebut" specific statements by a public official. Bush could always claim that his statement was taken out of context, or that what he really meant was something else. Also, reporters don't want to get on the "enemies list" by appearing to be overly hostile to the chief exec.

Liverpool, UK: Do you think spin-doctoring, 24hr news cycles and



"Media Politics: A Citizen's Guide," by Shanto Iyengar and Jennifer A. McGrady

TODAY'S LIVE DISCUSSIONS

Tuesday's Sessions

- **Life at Work:** Amy Joyce, 11
- **Garden Plot:** Adrian Higgins, 11
- **Post Politics:** Peter Baker, 11
- **Schools:** Student Mental Health, 11
- **Fitness:** Ask Moving Crew, 11:30
- **Gun Laws:** Bias Against Guns, 12
- **What's Cooking:** Kim O'Donnel, 12
- **Iraq Policy:** R. Chandrasekaran, 12
- **Funny?:** Gene Weingarten, 12
- **K Street:** Jeffrey Birnbaum, 1
- **Opinion:** Eugene Robinson, 1
- **Lean Plate Club:** Sally Squires, 1
- **Health:** Md. Tactical Unit, 2
- **Local Politics:** Mark Plotkin, 2
- **Pop Music:** Freedom Rock 2
- **Book World:** Dad of Smithsonian, 3

emphasis on ensuring that all politicians are 'on message' is undermining the democratic process? Or, is it making politics more accessible to people?

Shanto Iyengar: Undermining the process for sure. In order to maintain their popularity, politicians cannot afford to prescribe "bitter medicine." Policy is adopted not on the merits, but on the basis of "does it sell." Pandering to public opinion replaces leadership as the modus operandi of government.

Lexington, Va.: First, let me express my appreciation to you for your decades of leading-edge research in political participation. My students have learned much from your work. I have not read "Media Politics," only an overview, but that made me wonder whether you're discussing a new phenomenon or a widening of what we might call warped responsiveness to the general, largely uninformed public. Lack of new minimum-wage legislation, to use your example, can be seen as spineless catering by the old GOP majority to its upper-middle-class constituency.

Shanto Iyengar: The book discusses the central role of the news media in the current political process. Candidates rely on the media to get elected, and policy makers rely on the same strategies to enact laws. We live in the era of the permanent campaign. The use of these media strategies has predictable consequences -- elected officials are preoccupied with their public image and level of popularity, they are disinclined to address the tough problems facing this society. Blame avoidance and credit claiming take precedence over bargaining and the forging of compromise legislation. (Everyone remembers what happened to Bush Sr in 1990 when he reneged on his "read my lips?" promise.)

Laurel, Md.: In the chapter excerpt on your linked site you mention that as of some fairly recent date, a fairly substantial portion of the American electorate still believed that the U.S. military had found WMDs in Iraq or that it had been shown that Saddam Hussein was involved in the September 11 attacks. This is, correctly, held up as an example of the failure of the media to inform. But let me site some other widely held myths:

Women are paid 24% less than men for doing the same work. (This is false because the 24% figure is the difference in average salary BEFORE differences in hours, education, seniority and working conditions are taken into account.)

New Jersey police were, before the practice was halted, more likely to pull over African-American drivers than whites for the same infractions. (Wrong -- a study showed the difference in pull-overs reflected differences in driving habits.)

There was a spate of burning of black churches in South in the 90s in a pattern that suggested targeted arson. (Wrong -- white churches of the same construction burned at the same rate.)

I don't see the media taking any important steps to correct these mis-perceptions. The stories were widely reported. Then simply dropped when there turned out not to be a story.

Shouldn't the media be doing more to correct mis-perceptions that it's responsible for disseminating. Or does it not really mind if these myths are widely believed because it might motivate attitudes most media people want to encourage.

Shanto Iyengar: Good point - the media have a tendency to gloss over errors in reporting unless it reaches "scandalous" proportions. In the case of the example cited (WMD), the errors were understandable since the press was merely following the lead of the Bush Administration. In the case of foreign policy, what the administration says is news, the press has very little ability to question official accounts.

Atlanta, Ga.: In your opinion, does the media do enough to help properly inform people of these things? Are they doing anything wrong?

Shanto Iyengar: The media is preoccupied with making a buck. One of the reasons Americans are much less informed about public affairs than citizens in other countries is the performance of our press.

Fairfax, Va.: Has your research covered the way in which the media itself frames or defines issues in the political arena? For example, a few days ago NBC boldly pronounced there is a civil war in Iraq although many military and academic experts have characterized the fighting in Iraq that way for quite some time. Are you looking at what factors (corporate influence, public opinion polls, etc.) shape the way the media define the issues which in turn shapes the way the electorate understands the issues?

Shanto Iyengar: Yes, the question of framing is central to media research. I wrote a book (*Is Anyone Responsible?*) about the tendency of media to personalize most policy debates (so as to make their news more interesting). It turns out that this tendency to rely on "episodic framing" deflects attention from societal or other impersonal forces; in the case of poverty for example, people attributed responsibility not to public policy or structural bias, but to the actions of the poor. Because news reports invariably direct attention at the actions of individuals, readers gravitate to individualistic rather than societal accounts of responsibility. Media coverage contributes to a "blame the victim" syndrome.

Washington, D.C.: Media, whether Tom Paine's pamphlets or Luther's vernacular bibles, has long held an instrumental role in forming or misinforming public opinion with political result. Does the genuinely new pace of global interaction/communication significantly alter the ability of the reigning power in a society (the communist elite in China, corporate power in the U.S.) to dominate and distort public opinion? What's really new?

Shanto Iyengar: What's different is the quality of information. 50 years ago, news coverage of politics was far more substantive - you'd learn what the candidates had to say on the campaign trail. Today, all you get is "expert analysis;" the average length of broadcast time given to the candidates is now 6 seconds. The new style of interpretive journalism put far greater emphasis on campaign strategy and machinations than the issues. The public learns a lot about the different ads being used in the campaign, but precious little about the candidates' positions on the issues of the day.

Silver Spring, Md.: Your chat introduction mentions "social and economic" policy as often being guided by an ill-informed public. To that one must emphatically add "foreign policy". At one point in 2002, a bewildering 70% of the American public actually believed that Saddam Hussein had attacked us on 9/11. That misconception, it seems clear to anyone who was watching, was driven by a carefully orchestrated insinuation/association campaign from an administration that needed public support for its long-held war plans. The media (including the venerated *Washington Post*) mostly reported these disinformation talking points without contexting them with established facts (such as, "no prominent intelligence official in any government believes this connection to be even remotely valid"). The figure was down to a mere majority (52%) by the time of the 2004 "referendum on the Iraq War" (presidential election), and today I think sits at a "healthy" 42%. Whither the Information Age? If we don't even have the facts when choosing to go to war, is it at all surprising that we enter into other policy decisions misinformed?

Shanto Iyengar: Absolutely right - public information on matters of foreign affairs is typically below that for other policy areas. Last I checked, approx' 25% of the public believes we did find WMD. I'm afraid the "information age" is driven mainly by market considerations - publish stuff that people will read, soft news drives out substance.

Fallbrook, Calif.: Hello and thank you for your efforts to enlighten in this increasingly symbiotic relationship. I was a Communications major at Stanford during the Watergate years and became a very strong supporter of adversarial journalism as the optimal solution for making all of the system's checks and balances in line.

As large corporate and monied interests have merged with our political system, however, mainstream adversarial journalism appears to have been completely submerged and avoided nowadays. Some of this I blame on the short attention span of the public. How do you see all of this playing out in the future? PS. I promise to buy the book! Cheers.

Shanto Iyengar: Glad to hear of your Stanford connection! One of the

interesting questions concerns the role of IT. Will this "liberate" consumers and allow them to sample widely from a rich array of political perspectives? Or, alternatively, will the spread of the web only accelerate current trends away from substantive news. Will web users gravitate to shopping or porn sites instead of becoming informed about events in Lebanon or Iran. My hunch is the former.

Philadelphia, Pa.: In a recent chat, David Broder suggested that the Internet has a mixed effect on the public's information, because while the information comes in faster and is easily accessible, people often just skim the headline and miss the details. What are your thoughts on this?

Shanto Iyengar: Certainly the Internet has accelerated the news cycle - news organizations now have to get the information out much faster to keep pace with their competitors. In the famous incident involving Monica Lewinsky's dress, the Drudge Report "published" while Newsweek was still doing their fact-checking. So one consequence is that the standards of journalism may be compromised.

More generally, the question is really about what people will do with the Internet? Will they spend time online browsing news sites, or will they be shopping for travel bargains or watching the latest basketball scores? The available evidence suggests that most people fall into the latter category -- consumers, not citizens.

State College, Pa.: It seems that every few weeks, we see a new bumper sticker slogan being floated through the media, such as:

"As the Iraqis stand up, the U.S. will stand down."

"Stay the Course."

"Go Big" / "Go Long" / "Go Home"

I find that these sorts of sound-byte slogans drastically oversimplify complex phenomena.

Can you comment on what you see as the dangers of oversimplification in the media today?

Shanto Iyengar: News is, by definition, an oversimplification. After all, hundreds of events occur on a daily basis and the media can hardly cover them all. They select and the question is on what basis? Events in Washington DC seem more newsworthy than events in New Delhi or Caracas. A different basis for selection may have to do with the content of the news. Local news, for instance, invariably features violent crime, even though violent crime in general has declined quite significantly over the past decade. Why the preoccupation with crime? The need for good ratings; crime stories sell.

And at the level of slogans and sound-bites, I'm afraid that is part and parcel of modern political discourse. If a candidate knows she will be on the news for five seconds, she behaves accordingly.

Bowie, Md.: Speaking of breaking non-news, why has there been so little coverage in the MSM about the fact that those six Muslims taken off a plane in Minneapolis last week had engaged in terrorist-profile behavior -- most importantly, they took the six seats nearest the exits, which they had not been assigned.

Shanto Iyengar: It is quite possible that their actions contributed to what occurred. But I would suspect that their physical appearance was also significant.

Laurel, Md.: In 2002, while the Iraq invasion was being debated, CNN ran considerable Iraq-related programming with graphics labeled "Operation Iraq" or something like that. The implication being that an invasion was inevitable.

Now, there's not much question that an Iraq invasion would be great for CNN; so didn't they use their coverage to propagate the idea that there would be a war?

On a smaller scale, our local news is about to enter "possible blizzard" season to get viewers to tune into their coverage of every two-inch snowfall.

Shanto Iyengar: Yes, there is a well-known increase in the ratings for CNN (and other cable news outlets) during times of war. In the case of CNN, their reputation as a news organization really took off during the Gulf War when they were the only news organization with reporters in Baghdad as the American bombing campaign began. They provided live coverage from the rooftop of their hotel.

And as far as the local news goes, anything that will hold the audience's attention is fair game for the news. One can generally tell when there is a sweeps period (when ratings get translated into advertising rates) from the softness of the news.

Southbury, Conn.: Is it right for the Bush administration, or for that matter any administration, to deliberately leak stories (like the Hadley memo) when it suits them and when it does not suit them (illegal wiretap, secret CIA prisons etc.) to call the leaker and the newspaper that publishes them unpatriotic or is this just par for the course?

Shanto Iyengar: Leaking has been par for the course for decades. In the case of the Hadley memo, one assumes a "dissident" within the administration was the culprit. More generally, leaking is symptomatic of the new form of media-based governance; one tries to influence policy by getting stories into the media (aka "going public"). If I can put in a plug, the book discusses this and other forms of public posturing in some detail.

Oxford, Ohio: I think Fallbrook fails to see that adversarial reporting has assisted the building of walls between institutions such as the White House. Bush 11 the cannot get a break on anything, even Clinton saw the press as an adversary, to be manipulated as best as could be done. LBJ lost the battle in Viet Nam, but in the bigger scheme of things, he won the battle with communism as he showed we would not cede territory and influence to them. We could have bombed back to the Stone Age in a minute.

That is the parallel with Iraq as we showing that we will stand up and fight terrorism, not rollover and let them spread their hate.

Don't give these institutions a blank check, but give credit when credit is due. I know it won't sell many more papers, but perhaps a truer picture of what is going on may be picked up by the public.

Shanto Iyengar: But it is the case that adversarial reporting has pretty much become extinct, at least in the realm of national security. The Iran-Contra story was missed by the mainstream press and the whole saga of Iraq in the months leading up to the invasion is one of deferential reporting with the press dutifully accepting the claims of the Pentagon, State Dept et al.

Arlington, Va.: With regard to your earlier comment, of course the media is out to make a buck. Well, hopefully media enterprises aren't purely profit-minded, but of course they need to make money to keep going. What do you think the media could do change to mitigate some of the supposed damages to the political process? The 24-hour news cycle isn't going away.

Shanto Iyengar: You're right; the market is a fact of life. What can be done to protect against market pressures? Other societies have implemented the concept of public service broadcasting -- subsidize a television network and require that it provide programming that is both informative and representative of the diversity of perspectives in society. The market share of the public broadcaster in most industrialized democracies is around 30 percent; PBS, however, is an outlier - maybe 2 or 3 percent on a good day. What I'm suggesting is that the presence of a strong public broadcaster tends to elevate the quality of news coverage and, indirectly, the civic life of society.

Fed up: "Shanto Iyengar: The media is preoccupied with making a buck. One of the reasons Americans are much less informed about public affairs than citizens in other countries is the performance of our press. "

I've had it with this nonsense.

If you think the media is in it for the money, Mr. Iyengar, you've obviously never worked in a newsroom. The journalists I have known throughout my lifetime got into journalism because they wanted to inform people and make a difference. They have worked 12, 14 and 16 hour days trying to do that. And if you look at their paychecks, you know they're not making any money.

The public kicks the media when things aren't going right. They kick the media when their world view is challenged. When reporters risk their lives in Iraq, they accuse them of treason. When reporters get killed in Iraq, they shrug.

And they look with long, dewy-eyed stares at the glorious (and obviously superior) British media, which has never, EVER done anything for a profit. Because, you know, Rupert Murdoch is this generation's Adolph Ochs. And openly partisan reporting, royal scandals and topless women on Page Three are the height of journalistic credibility, right?

Is there room for media criticism? Yes. Is there reason for media criticism. Heck yes. And the fact is, you can get more of it from more different perspectives than you ever could. So drop the barracks mentality when the "MSM" doesn't quite take your viewpoint in a story. You've got more reporting from more areas and more people than ever: Take advantage of it, read critically and accept the fact the media is there to give you information to base your decisions upon, not to make up your mind for you.

Shanto Iyengar: The profit motive is one thing, the rate of pay for journalists quite another. To attribute trends in the news to market pressures is not equivalent to attacking the motives of journalists.

And I take your point that there is plenty of substantive news out there; any citizen who really wants to be informed on the issues can do so quite easily.

Glenside, Pa.: You discuss the role ill informed public opinion plays in foreign affairs. What about the media's role in clumsy-even-false things about candidates? Election '06 saw a lot of ads get pulled because of factual distortions.

Shanto Iyengar: This is one of the worst aspects of election news - the pre-occupation with ads. The fact of the matter is that campaigns use ads to draw the attention of the press. In 1988 the "Willie Horton" ad was big news and crime became the story of the day. In 2004, the Swift Boat ad was used to raise questions about Sen Kerry's Vietnam service (and it got huge news coverage). Because the press has decided to go after candidates' ads, the candidates in turn have decided to use their ads as "bait." They could care less that the press reveals distortions or exaggerations, so long as the issue underlying the ad (crime in the case of the Horton ad, character in the case of the Swift Boat ad) gets some play in the news.

Fallbrook, Calif.: (Going for a follow up) As I interpret your thinking, the U.S. citizenry appears to prefer porn and play over politics. (And, here, I will not get into it all being sold for entertainment value with content the only difference...) Can you see then, a continuing domestic drift in this direction and eventual arrival at a Third Reich-ian system, where the government, large business and the press are essentially managing the country with one voice?

Also...what is the general thinking about alternative sources of thought-pieces...like the Asian Times?

Thanks again.

Shanto Iyengar: Yes, there is definitely the possibility of large-scale opinion manipulation. One wonders whether the public would have supported unilateral intervention in Iraq had they been reasonably well-informed about the nature of Iraqi society, middle east geo-politics etc. In the academic literature, there is an interesting debate between people who claim that there are substitutes for information - that so-called "heuristics" allow people to express quasi-informed opinions, and others who claim that when people do become informed they express significantly different political views. So the bottom line question is really how do we get people to take the task of citizenship more seriously.

Herndon, Va.: Don't know if you got much about this in California, but in the

D.C. area this autumn, one might have gotten the impression that the most important issue facing our country was epithets for people from India.

When the news is dominated by a story like that one for a long time, do but voters conclude that this must be an important issue, since it's on the news all the time?

Shanto Iyengar: Yes, the so-called "agenda-setting" effect has been documented in study after study.

Rockville, Md.: I assume you're familiar with William McGowan's "Coloring the News." Do you have any major disagreements with any he said?

Shanto Iyengar: Yes, there is a degree of orthodoxy in journalism just as there is in any profession. In the arena of elections and campaigns, the prevailing wisdom is that journalists should expose the shenanigans and manipulative intent of the candidates, hence the nonstop coverage of ads and the use of so-called experts to explain and reveal the candidates' strategies. This "horse race" mentality has the effect of driving out information concerning policy debates, the candidates' resumes, etc.

Arlington, Va.: You wrote: "...I'm afraid the "information age" is driven mainly by market considerations - publish stuff that people will read, soft news drives out substance." What you didn't add, which I think is essential, is that people people read the Drudge Report (only as an example) or whatever one and only blog, or reference an unsolicited e-mail and they then in turn "spread the truth." The problem with the Internet is that even if one could retract a story, it's already been posted on hundreds of Web sites and untold millions of e-mails. A classic Web site story is the U.S. military personnel that "guard the tomb of the unknown can't curse or smoke for the rest of their lives..." Wonderful story, on hundreds of Web sites, obviously not true, but try to disclaim it and you're told you're anti-military or worse.

It's more than market considerations, it's a new media that perpetuates disinformation.

Shanto Iyengar: I agree, it is quite easy to circulate disinformation over the web. As the distinction between news organizations and blogs becomes blurred, so too does the difference between facts and opinions.

Southbury, Conn.: Why is it that progressive / liberal media is so successful in print, but a failure on talk radio?

Shanto Iyengar: Republicans had a head start with radio, built up a loyal following.

Colorado: How conscious are "old media" types of the effect of "new media"?

Example: A longtime conservative pundit today carefully constructed an anecdote about an encounter between the President and a newly elected Democratic Senator, leaving out key details in order to make the Senator look bad. This story was already old news (more than twelve hours!) on the Internet, and the reaction to the pundit's selective honesty has been pretty brutal. Does the speed with which news moves register with old guard print types?

Shanto Iyengar: I think these days, almost every "old" news org is has a "new" incarnation. My suspicion is that the learning curve has been pretty fast; after all it is a question of survival.

New York, N.Y.: How do communications scholars take to the notion of objective news that professionals in the field seek to embrace?

Is it more like a "we'll do the best we can" to read that ideal for both camps? Or do academics criticize the notion as woefully naive?

Shanto Iyengar: I like to tell students that the best test of objectivity is the frequency of press criticism from all quarters. The problem is that it is difficult to subject objectivity to systematic scrutiny. One test might be to compare

real-world events with news coverage. Do increases in unemployment attract more news than decreases? If the answer is yes, this suggests a negativity bias in the news. But for many issues, we don't have handy and trusted indicators of the state of the world making it difficult to disentangle "reality" from "mediality."

Alexandria, Va.: Professor Iyengar: Thanks for doing this... Your response about information shortcuts is limited to the general public: "One wonders whether the public would have supported unilateral intervention in Iraq had they been reasonably well-informed about the nature of Iraqi society, Middle East geo-politics etc. In the academic literature, there is an interesting debate between people who claim that there are substitutes for information - that so-called "heuristics" allow people to express quasi-informed opinions."

It seems to me that most of Congress and other elite decision makers were similarly misinformed. Shouldn't this logic apply to our policymakers, too? How do we accurately inform even those whose job is to take the "task of citizenship seriously"?

Shanto Iyengar: The conventional wisdom in academia is that political elites are more informed. Congressmen have access to committee reports, they hold hearings etc etc and make their decisions accordingly. Of course, there are debates about exec versus legislative prerogatives - the prez has greater control over the supply of info concerning foreign affairs while congress is more on an even footing for domestic issues. But the more important question is whether policy makers decide on the basis of their information concerning the effectiveness of competing policy options or, instead, on the basis of their re-election prospects. As discussed earlier, the current system places a premium on popularity, making it difficult for elected representatives to enact policy on the merits.

Shanto Iyengar: Thanks very much for so many interesting comments and questions. Signing off,

Shanto Iyengar

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