

Citizenship and the Media: Isolated in the New Century?

Lecture by

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It truly is an honor and a pleasure to be here today to participate in the celebration of the 100 years of publication of El Comercio.

I'm delighted as well to have this opportunity to speak on the topic: Media and Citizenship.

I'm going to make my comments in the context of a specific issue in the United States, public support for the War in Iraq.

My thesis is simple. I believe support for the war has been and is based on misperceptions about the war and its justification. I believe those misperceptions illustrate a significant weakness of the communication system in our society. Specifically, I believe the misperceptions reflect a disconnection between the media and the citizens of our society.

I also believe there is reason to worry that changes taking place in the media landscape in the United States make it more likely—not less likely—that the media system will be even more disconnected from the citizenry in the future.

I am making my observations about the United States. I leave it to other members of the panel to comment on the media and citizenship in this country and elsewhere. I enjoyed very much the presentations to this point and look forward to learning more as this conference progresses.

I suspect that most people here know that public support for the war in Iraq has declined in the United States. An ABC/Washington Post Poll conducted a few weeks ago showed that only 37% of the population thinks the war “was worth fighting”—the lowest figure the poll has recorded and down from 70% figure just after the war began in 2003. A Newsweek Poll conducted at nearly the same time showed that only 32% of the population approves of the way President George Bush is “handling the situation in Iraq.” Only 9% of those surveyed by CBS and The New York Times at the beginning of May said they had “a lot” of confidence that President Bush “will be able to successfully end the war in Iraq.” Also in early May, 53% of those surveyed in a CNN Poll said the war in Iraq has made the U.S. “less safe from terrorism,” while only 33% thought it had made the U.S. “safer.”

While current opposition to the war is known, what is not as well known—even in the United States—is how much opposition has existed to the war in the public from the very beginning. Just before

the war began, only 53% of those surveyed by the Gallup Organization said it was “worth going to war” in Iraq, and 42% said it “was not worth going to war.” (CHART 1) Those thinking it was worth going to war jumped to 68% once the invasion began, but the support rather quickly began to erode, and now it is 60% saying it was not worth going to war vs. 37% saying it was worth going to war.

In fact, Gallup found opinion supporting and opposing an Invasion of Iraq to be relatively stable from the end of the First Gulf War until the actual invasion in 2003 (CHART 2). Note the increase in support after September 11, 2001, and again in the weeks just before the war. Support for the war jumped just after the invasion, and then began to decline (CHART 3). By June of 2004, a majority of respondents felt it was a mistake to have sent troops to invade Iraq. In sum, there has been rather consistent opposition to the War from the start, and at present about six in 10 of the population think it was a mistake to have gone to war.

Gallup and other polling organizations have asked a number of different questions about Iraq over the three plus years of the war. One question from Gallup stands out, in my view. Gallup has asked periodically: “Do you think Saddam Hussein was personally involved in the September 11th terrorist attacks, or not?” When the question was first asked back in September of 2002, 53% of the population said he was personally involved (CHART 4). This view changed, again around the middle of 2004, and today 54% of the population say Saddam was not involved in the September 11 attacks. An astounding 39%, however, say even today that Saddam was personally involved in those attacks.

Misperceptions about the war have been the subject of considerable attention. Some of you may have seen the movie, *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch’s War on Journalism*, which was directed by Robert Greenwald. According to the movie, at least some of the misperceptions are the result of watching Fox news.

The assertion is based on a study conducted by the Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland. The case is much complicated than the movie suggested.

The University of Maryland researchers found that Fox viewers early in the war (from January through May of 2003) were more likely to hold misperceptions about the war—including the misperception

that Saddam Hussein was working closely with al-Qaeda. In fact, 80% of those who “tend to get most of” their news from Fox had at least one misperception about the War. But those who got their news from other media also made mistakes (CHART 5).

The researchers at the University of Maryland focused on three distinct errors: evidence that Saddam was working with al-Qaeda, that weapons of mass destruction had been found in Iraq, and that world public opinion favored the U.S. going to war with Iraq. The researchers found that 60% of the population had at least one of these things wrong (CHART 6).

These misperceptions have been found to be strongly linked to support for the war. In each of these three areas, those who gave the wrong answer were more likely to think the U.S. made the right decision in going to war in Iraq. Cumulatively, the effect of misperceptions was quite striking. (CHART 7). Only 23% of those with no misperceptions supported the war, while 86% of those with three misperceptions supported the war. In addition, subsequent analysis of later surveys found that misperceptions were related to support for Bush in the 2004 election—those with more misperceptions were more likely to support Bush. Those with misperceptions were more likely to label Bush as “honest and frank.”

Three years into the war—in March of 2006—PIPA found that 23% of the population still believed that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction before the war and another 18% believed Iraq had a major WMD program. Forty-two percent of the population believed Iraq had only limited WMD activities, and 16% believed that Iraq before the war had no WMD activities. Of those believing that Iraq had WMD, 85% said the U.S. had made the right decision in invading Iraq, while only 5% of those who said Iraq had no WMD believed the U.S. had made the right decision.

What is clear is that people have misperceptions. These misperceptions have been surprisingly persistent. And the misperceptions have consequences.

Let’s be fair. It can be that people hold on to misperceptions because they support the war or support Bush. In other words, it may be that the misperceptions do not lead to support for the war or Bush, but rather they are justifications of those positions.

Regardless, the fact that so many people make so many fundamental mistakes about the war

tells us something. Information is not reaching the public.

Perhaps this is because the media didn't present it clearly. Perhaps it is because the media merely carried the claims of the proponents of the war without critical assessments of the assertions of those clamoring for war. Perhaps the citizens ignored the media when they were critical. Perhaps they listened to what the politicians were saying initially and missed their subsequent acknowledgments of misstatements. Or perhaps the citizens simply blocked out the information provided by the media.

Regardless, the evidence is that the citizenry was not, and in many cases is not, well informed.

These are not tranquil times for the "old" media in the United States. Some believe that newspapers will not exist in 20 years. The major networks continue to lose audience, including for their newscasts. Many young people get their news from comedy shows, from web sites and from blogs, and from their cell phones.

As usual, there are optimists and pessimists. The optimists point out that there are more news voices than ever before, that entry costs for the creation of media organizations are low, and that, with the web, everyone can be a journalist.

In addition, as The Economist wrote in its recent Survey of New Media (April of 2006), journalism is becoming interactive and, in The Economist's view, "maybe better."

I personally enjoy the fruits of these changes. I have two web sites for my professional work and another for a group I created to help preserve a stream that runs through my county—and my back yard. I also run a listserv for that group. I do a newsletter for our home owners association on my home computer. The home owners association also has a web site, to which I post. I am a journalist again.

I also have more sources of news about what is going on in my county than before. I don't have to rely on the weekly newspaper, which doesn't do a very good job, or the daily, which is only marginally better. I get a listserv, run by a retired IRS agent who loves monitoring the ongoings of county government, and a blog from a former county official who finds great pleasure in pointing out mistakes of his successors.

At the same time, I realize I'm very short of time myself, and my neighbors seem to be even

shorter of time. Getting their attention is extremely difficult. Getting them to do something, such as attend a meeting, is even more of a challenge.

This new, fragmented media world puts a tremendous burden on the citizenry—and on our educational system and on the old media as well.

In a world where there is no dominant voice, where people can and do select their information sources to suite their own needs and biases, there is a very real chance that little information is going to get through.

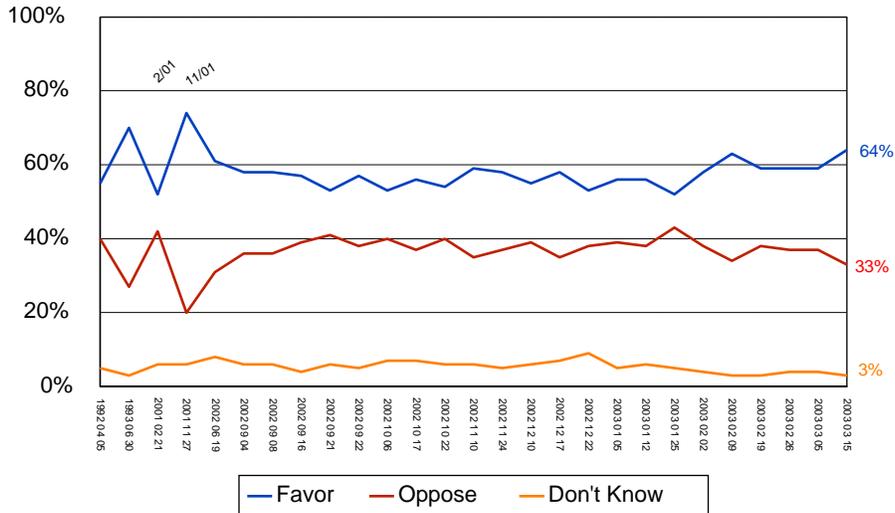
The Iraq war illustrates that this is far from a trivial issue. I believe that public opinion is shaping U.S. policy on the war now, as it did at the beginning. I don't believe any president can lead a country to war without significant support of its citizenry. But the support for the Iraq war was based in part on misinformation.

The framers of this session raised a question: Are the media and the citizens going to be disconnected or isolated from each other in this our new century? I'm inclined to be a pessimist here, and I think the consequences are very troubling.

I'm hoping the old media find new ways to attract and hold our attention. I'm hoping El Comercio is here to celebrate a 200th birthday.

2. Support for Invasion of Iraq

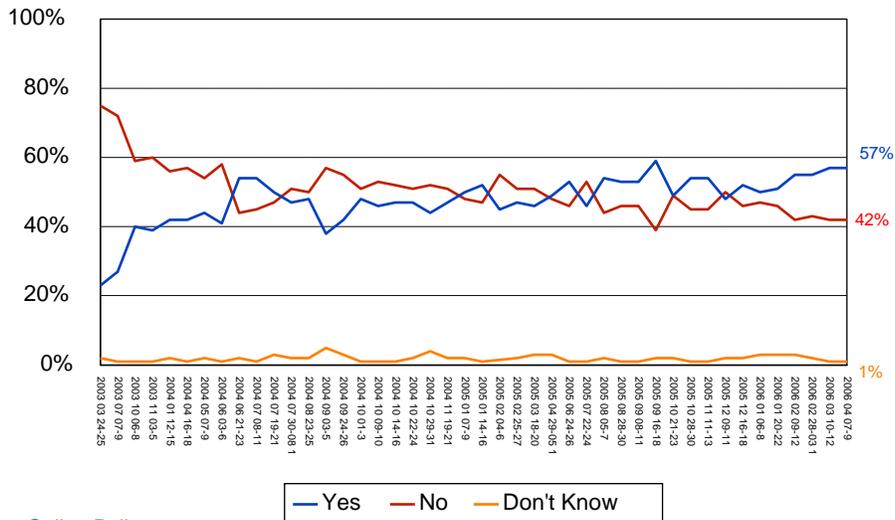
Would you favor or oppose invading Iraq with U.S. ground troops in an attempt to remove Saddam Hussein from power?



Gallup Poll

3. Support for War

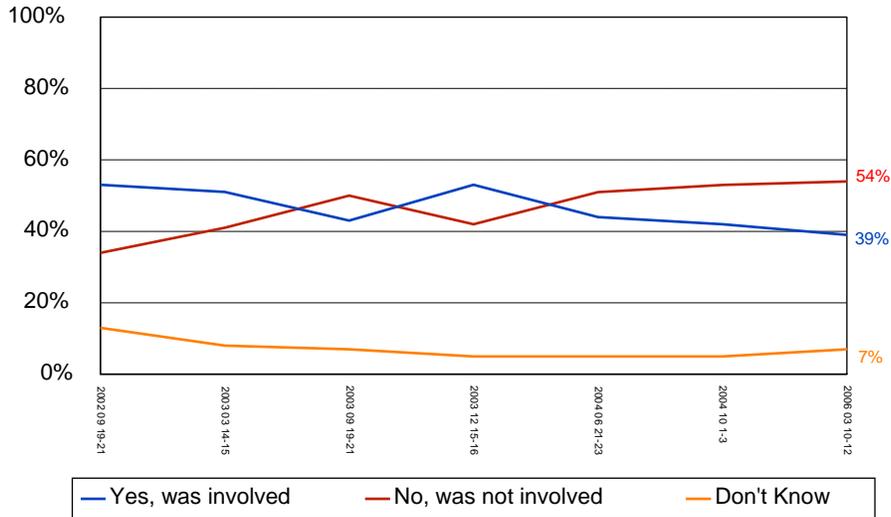
In view of the developments since we first sent our troops to Iraq, do you think the United States made a mistake in sending troops to Iraq, or not?



Gallup Poll

4. Saddam's Involvement in 9-11

Do you think Saddam Hussein was personally involved in the September 11th terrorist attacks, or not?



Gallup Poll

5. Misperceptions and Source of Information

“Where do you tend to get most of your news? (Offered options of “newspapers and magazines” or “TV and radio.”) Respondents were then asked: “If one of the networks below is your primary source of news please select it. If you get news from two or more networks about equally, just go on to the next question.”

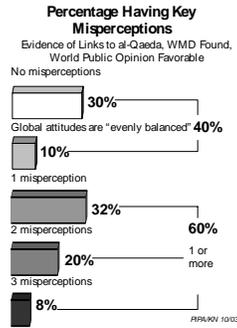
Number of misperceptions per respondent	Fox	CBS	ABC	CNN	NBC	Print media	NPR/PBS
None of the 3	20%	30%	39%	45%	45%	53%	77%
1 or more misperceptions	80	71	61	55	55	47	23

WorldPublicOpinion.Org

6. Misperceptions about War in Iraq

Three misperceptions in surveys:

- Evidence that Saddam Hussein was working closely with al-Qaeda have been *found*
- Weapons of mass destruction have been *found* in Iraq
- World public opinion *favored* the US going to war with Iraq



7. Consequences of Misperceptions

Do you think the US made the right decision or the wrong decision in going to war against Iraq?

Cumulative Effect of Misperceptions on Support for War

Support for war among those who have:

