

During fall 2004 semester, I taught 54 UI students in a course called Mass Media and Public Opinion. Between the war in Iraq and the presidential election, we had plenty to watch, read and talk about. I was worried class discussion would break down into the mudslinging that passes for political dialogue in our country today. That didn't happen, even though we came from diverse backgrounds, espoused a wide range of political perspectives and confronted tough material.

We watched videos about Afghanistan and Iraq produced by Australians, Americans and Brits and archival footage of Ralph Reed as a college student, long before he co-founded the Christian Coalition and helped change the shape of American culture and politics. We watched an editor of U.S. News and World Report on "Meet the Press." UI alumnus Mike Kirk's "Rumsfeld's War" aired on public television mid-semester and we watched it, too. We read articles and books by military leaders and media scholars. We looked at what information on election issues got into American homes through mainstream media, and what was left out for us to go hunt down elsewhere. We considered why those patterns exist. What strikes me is that we never argued.

Why should that be so surprising?

It's surprising because I watched as my neighbors staked out and lined up their Bush/Cheney and Kerry/Edwards signs in rows across our street, like so many small soldiers facing each other in battle. It's surprising because I watched Bill O'Reilly scream, "Shut up!" on FOX. It's surprising because the deep division and discord that seem to have taken over our country play out even in my immediate family, and in the families of most of the students in the class. It's surprising because mass media and public opinion today are marked by name calling and inflammatory, polarizing rhetoric. What was the difference between "Crossfire" and our class?



The State of Journalism

BY REBECCA SELF

The difference lay in finding hard facts and real information on the issues we cared about. As long as we discussed facts and where they'd come from, we didn't argue. The problem was that they were very hard to find.

Students sifted through article after article that described, in horserace style, who was ahead at the polls and pitted so-called conservative and liberal pundits against one another in useless, vitriolic exchanges. When we unearthed facts, historical context and the bigger picture on issues, we found that, like most Americans, we didn't fall along clearly defined conservative and liberal lines. Each of us, depending on our backgrounds and decision-making criteria, aligned with what we would call conservatives on some issues and liberals on others.

There's a problem with journalism today, but it isn't the one that's normally discussed. It's not that media are liberal or conservative; it's that that ideological division prevents informed participation in public discourse. The media have reduced public opinion from a valuable and powerful source of political authority to the counting up of uninformed but ideologically polarized opinions.

There's a lesson here for all of us, and

a call to action.

What the Mass Media and Public Opinion class discovered is that political and media pundits are so busy accusing each other of being conservative or liberal that journalists, politicians and the public aren't doing the things we need to do to preserve, protect and promote a vital, thriving democracy. The class learned to separate ideology from information and to consider where our information and opinions come from. With few exceptions, media perpetuate the deep division we all see — in our families and communities, and in our

nation-state. And we're not holding the media accountable.

We live in a country founded on the notion that public opinion is a strong, valuable force in our governance. We also live in a nation founded on the belief that no one organization — governmental, religious or corporate — should hold too much power over our lives. In order for those tenets to remain cornerstones in our country, the press must act as the Fourth Estate, bravely questioning those in power and informing the public on issues of importance — from health care reform and education spending to the facts about the war in Iraq. As Bill Moyers recently said, as he ended his 30-plus year career as a journalist, "...news is what powerful people want to keep hidden; everything else is publicity."

No matter where we fall on the ideological spectrum, it's our duty to stay accurately informed, express ourselves and take a stand for those elements central to a healthy democracy. **1**



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