

begun pander to a variety of consumer impulses. In an alienated and frightened society, media has found it commercially rewarding to attack the effectiveness, and then the legitimacy of government. In summary, Alboim says that in the near-term, mass media will remain the main source of information for most people and it will determine the news agenda by commercially driven criteria; that news agenda is transmuted by the electorate into a public policy agenda and leadership is evaluated by the electorate and sometimes hostile media by the way it hews to, and resolves, that agenda. This, according to Alboim, explained in large part government by risk avoidance.

Mr. Alboim predicted that IT and the application of these technologies to information gathering and distribution will lead to a further stratification of the media. As an example he described the strains on general interest mass media like the national television networks as they face the challenge of strong specialty channels that siphon audience shares; as well, what is emerging is wholly separate elite news media that takes two forms: high cost, tightly edited and controlled intelligence gathering newsletters that sell what used to be free and their inverse on the Internet: eclectic, unedited, free for all bulletin boards that give away what used to be sold. This fragmentation, said Alboim, is leading to an alienation of the elites and has contributed in turn to the seizure of the public agenda by more radical elements. That is, if general media, both popular and elite continue to weaken, if news agendas and common experiences continue to differentiate, he believes that what will be created are pools of people with different information bases, different sets of agendas, different sets of expectations, different sets of standards for government performance, different sets of policy demands, and different levels of attachment to traditionally common institutions and values.

Why should we be concerned?, asks Alboim. With digitization has come the end of the centrally-gathered news, which means that the inferred or implied credibility (especially as journalists lose their status as quasi-certified professionals) will also be fragmented as single interest groups take advantage of the multiplicity of channels available to them. Thus the credibility of information supplied by single interest groups will be indistinguishable from the credibility of that distributed by central news organizations. Mr. Alboim noted that for optimists this is the optimal pluralization of the public policy agenda - governance in the absence of control of carriage (especially in the West where there appears to be a reluctance to control IT). For pessimists this trend has the potential to lead to a decoupling of the mass segment of society from national goals and the possibility of a minority setting the public policy agenda. At the same time, if elite structures in the late 20th century are based on IT, this has the dangerous potential to create an aristocratic state.

The fragmentation of information will lead to polarization: some segments of civic society will only receive information that they want to receive. According to Alboim, this in turn may lead to a "paralysis of choice" for the broad middle class segment of society. The stratification in the media is now being transposed to another level. That is, there is very little cross-over from one level of usage to another. In Canada and the US we had shared experiences. Every generation had shared experiences. But now, through the fragmentation