

## **Chapter 1:**

### **The News Media and Democracy**

Recent years have seen growing tensions between the ideals and the perceived performance of democratic institutions<sup>1</sup>. While there is no 'crisis of democracy', many believe that all is not well with the body politic. In the United States concern has focused on widespread cynicism about political institutions and leaders, fuelling fears about civic disengagement and a half-empty ballot box<sup>2</sup>. The common view in American politics is that the public turns off, knows little, cares less and stays home. Similar worries have been expressed in Europe, particularly at the supranational level. Commentators have noted a crisis of legitimacy as the power and scope of the European Union have steadily expanded despite public disengagement from critical policy choices<sup>3</sup>. One indicator is plummeting turnout in European elections, falling to under half the electorate in 1999, down from three quarters two decades earlier. The growth of critical citizens is open to many explanations, explored in a previous study, including the failure of government performance, changing cultural values, and problems of institutional design<sup>4</sup>.

One of the commonest perspectives, deserving critical examination, concerns developments in political communications. During the last decade a rising tide of voices on both sides of the Atlantic has blamed the news media for growing public disengagement, ignorance of civic affairs, and mistrust of government. This view has become so widespread that it has developed into something of an unquestioned orthodoxy in the popular literature, particularly in the United States. Another related perspective, more prevalent in Europe, regards the growth of professional political marketing by parties as also contributing towards greater public cynicism.

But is the conventional wisdom correct? Is the process of political communications by the news media and by parties responsible for civic malaise? This book sets out to challenge this perspective based on a systematic examination of the role of political communications in post-industrial societies. Rather than mistakenly 'blaming the messenger', we need to understand and confront more deep-rooted flaws in systems of representative government.

### **The Conventional Critique of Political Communications**

Let us first outline popular accounts of 'videomalaise', which have become so pervasive, and then consider the alternative perspective developed in this book. The political science literature on videomalaise originated in the 1960s, developed in a series of scholarly articles in the post-Watergate 1970s, and rippled out to become the conventional wisdom in the popular culture of journalism and politics following a flood of books in the 1990s. The chorus of critics is loudest in the United States but similar echoes can be heard in Europe. There is no single theory or canonical text. We need to draw a clear distinction between the political effects of the news media and party campaigns, which we focus upon, and the social impact of the mass media more generally, including everything from Hollywood movies to TV entertainment, and rap music, which fall well outside the scope of this study.

In this book the term 'videomalaise' refers to accounts claiming that common practices in political communications by the news media and by party campaigns hinder civic engagement, meaning learning about public affairs, trust in government, and political activism<sup>5</sup>. That is, all theories we consider by definition make two core assumptions: (i) that the process of political communications has a significant impact upon civic engagement; and, (ii) that this impact is in a negative direction.

Accounts differ widely in the reasons given for this phenomenon. One school blames trends in journalism. Structural perspectives emphasize institutional developments common to many post-industrial societies, such as economic pressures moving the news industry down-market, the erosion of public service broadcasting, and the emergence of a more fragmented, multi-channel television environment. Cultural accounts stress historical events specific to the United States, notably the growth of a more adversarial news culture following Vietnam and Watergate. Others blame politics. Campaign accounts focus on the growth of political marketing with its attendant coterie of spin-doctors, advertising consultants and pollsters, reducing the personal connections between citizens and representatives. The earliest theorists made restricted claims, focused primarily upon common practices in television news. Later versions extended the scope far more widely to blame a news culture shared across many types of journalism. Multiple interpretations therefore cluster within this perspective. Irrespective of these important differences, what all videomalaise accounts share, by definition, is the belief that public disenchantment with the political process is due, at least in part, to the process of political communications.

There is nothing particularly novel about these claims. Many critics expressed concern about the effects of the popular press on moral decline throughout the nineteenth century as newspapers became more widely available<sup>6</sup>. The phenomenon of the 'yellow press' in the 1890s caused worry about its possible dangers for public affairs. In the 1920s and 1930s, the earliest theories of mass propaganda were based on the assumption that authoritarian regimes could dupe and choreograph the public by manipulating radio bulletins and newsreels<sup>7</sup>. Recent decades have seen multiple crusades against the supposed pernicious influence of the mass media, whether directed against violence in movies, the 'wasteland' of television, the dangers of tobacco advertising, or the supposedly pernicious effects of pop music<sup>8</sup>. While hardly new, what is different today is the unquestioning orthodoxy that has developed as a chorus of complaints has decried the impact of political communications on public life.

#### **The American Literature on Videomalaise**

The modern idea of 'videomalaise' emerged in the political science literature in the 1960s. Kurt and Gladys Lang were the first to make the connection between the rise of network news and broader feelings of disenchantment with American politics. TV broadcasts, they argued, fuelled public cynicism by over-emphasizing political conflict and downplaying routine policymaking in DC. This process, they suggested, had most impact on the 'inadvertent audience', who encountered politics because they happened to be watching TV when the news was shown, but who lacked much interest in, or prior knowledge about, public affairs<sup>9</sup>. The Langs proved an isolated voice at the time, in large part because the consensus in political communications

stressed the minimal effects of the mass media on public opinion.

The idea gained currency in the mid-1970s since it seemed to provide a plausible reason for growing public alienation in the post-Vietnam and post-Watergate era. Michael Robinson first popularized the term 'videomalaise' to describe the link between reliance upon American television journalism and feelings of political cynicism, social mistrust, and lack of political efficacy. Greater exposure to television news, he argued, with its high 'negativism', conflictual frames, and anti-institutional themes, generated political disaffection, frustration, cynicism, self-doubt and malaise.<sup>10</sup> For Robinson this process was most critical during election campaigns, where viewers were turned off, he argued, by TV's focus on the 'horse-race' at the expense of issues, analysis rather than factual information, and excessive 'bad news' about the candidates<sup>11</sup>. Many others echoed these claims over the years<sup>12</sup>. According to Samuel Huntington, in a widely influential report for the Trilateral Commission, the news media had eroded respect for government authority in many post-industrial societies, contributing towards a widespread 'crisis' of democracy evident on the streets of Washington DC, Paris and Tokyo<sup>13</sup>. Others argued that the problem was rooted less in TV news than in mainstream entertainment. For Gerbner, TV drama about violent crime and urban conflict cultivated fear, alienation, and interpersonal mistrust<sup>14</sup>. The prevailing view in the early 1980s was expressed by Austin Ranney who thought that television, while not solely responsible for civic disengagement, was a major contributory factor. TV *"...has altered the culture by intensifying ordinary Americans' traditional low opinion of politics and politicians, by exacerbating the decline in their trust and confidence in their government and its institutions, and by helping to make them even less inclined to vote than they used to be."*<sup>15</sup>

During the 1990s the trickle of complaints about the news media, from voices within and outside journalism, became a popular deluge. This reflected a new mood of angst about the vitality of democracy, at a time of widespread cynicism about political leaders and government institutions, and stronger claims about media effects. For Entman, the free press falls far short of its ideals, leaving too much of the American public ignorant and disconnected from politics<sup>16</sup>. For Neil Postman the major networks, driven by their hemorrhage of viewers to cable, have substituted entertainment-oriented, crime, celebrity and consumer-obsessed, tabloid television for serious political coverage of national and world affairs. The result is endless coverage of Hollywood, the 'health beat' and sports rather than the problems facing America, so that we are 'entertaining ourselves to death'<sup>17</sup>. For Roderick Hart, television charms the modern voter into an illusion of political participation and information, while encouraging couch potato passivity, thereby seducing America<sup>18</sup>. Neil Gabler echoes these claims, arguing that entertainment has come to be the predominant value on television news, with the result that the political process has been repackaged into show business. Serious political debate, serious policy problems, serious election coverage becomes marginalized in an entertainment-driven celebrity-oriented society where the one standard of value is whether something can grab and hold the public's attention<sup>19</sup>.

Larry Sabato warns of the dangers of pack journalism, with all the press corp focusing obsessively on a few sensationalist stories,

(O.J., Dianne, Lewinsky) producing a 'feeding frenzy'<sup>20</sup>. For Thomas Patterson, the press, in its role as election gatekeeper, has become a 'miscast' institution, out of order in the political system. The core reasons, he suggests, lies in the post-Vietnam and post-Watergate adversarial culture of American journalism combined with the rise of interpretative journalism<sup>21</sup>. As a result, he suggests, echoing Robinson and Sheehan<sup>22</sup>, today campaign coverage by all the news media (not just TV) provides excessive focus on the poll-driven horse-race ('who's ahead, who's behind'), on conflictual and negative news (bad news), and on strategic game frames (the insider scoop about what's behind proposals). Due to a cultural shift the routine campaign news frame for American journalists, he believes, routinely criticizes politicians for shifting positions, wavering on tough decisions, pandering to groups, and making promises they do not intend to keep. Based on public dissatisfaction with coverage in the 1996 Presidential campaign, Cappella and Jamieson stress that strategic news frames of politics activate cynicism about campaign politics, government and public policy<sup>23</sup>. Dautrich and Hartley conclude that the news media 'fail American voters', since many citizens believe that journalists place too much emphasis on campaign strategy and tactics, coverage is politically biased, and too little attention is devoted to information about political issues<sup>24</sup>.

James Fallows is concerned that down-market trends have produced the relentless pursuit of sensational, superficial, and populist political reporting on network news, in the attempt to maintain ratings before surfers click to other channels<sup>25</sup>. All this breathless flim-flam, Schudson argues, comes at the expense of detailed and informed debate about policy issues and 'hard' (real) news. The result is that although there is more information abundantly available for Americans than ever before, this does not create informed citizens<sup>26</sup>. Hachten complains that public affairs journalism, in particular, has been trivialized and corrupted by a melange of entertainment, celebrity, sensationalism, self-help and merchandising driven by advertising, PR and corporate profits<sup>27</sup>. Coverage of international affairs has been one of the worst casualties, many argue, as America has turned away from the complexities of the post-Cold War world<sup>28</sup>. Marvin Kalb has drawn attention to the 'new news', with commercial journalism driven further down-market due to new technology and economic restructuring in the industry<sup>29</sup>. The role of public television in the US, long under-funded as a poor cousin, has been unable to compensate for the relentless drive for ratings of network and cable TV<sup>30</sup>. Many conclude that the news media can be blamed for a host of political ills assumed to be plaguing America, whether widespread ignorance about government and public policy issues, declining electoral turnout, or widespread cynicism about government institutions. Criticisms have moved well beyond the halls of academe: many U.S. journalists share the belief that something is badly wrong with their profession in terms of traditional standards of accuracy, fairness and balance<sup>31</sup>. The Committee of Concerned Journalists, led by Tom Rosensteil and Bill Kovach, has debated potential reforms to the profession.

#### **The European Literature on Videomalaise**

In the European literature similar, although perhaps less strident, voices can also be heard. European accounts emphasize structural developments in the news industry and in party campaigning. Many fear that growing competition from commercial channels has undermined the

quality and diversity of public service television. The multiplication of media outlets, chasing the mass-market audience with low-cost, low-quality scheduling, is believed to have reduced the choice of program types<sup>32</sup>. This development may have eroded the audience's ability to make sense of public affairs and, echoing Habermas, there is widespread concern from commentators like Dahlgren that the displacement of public service television by commercial channels has impoverished the public sphere<sup>33</sup>. During the 1980s, the public sector experienced a massive program of privatization throughout Western Europe. During the same era, the growth of alternative commercial channels, breaking down the monopoly of public service broadcasting, undermined the rationale for subsidizing television through state resources. Schulz argues that in Germany the decline of public service broadcasting and the rise of commercial channels, the latter emphasizing the more sensational and negative aspects of political news, may have increased public cynicism<sup>34</sup>. Kaase fears that these developments may produce audiences segmented according to the amount of political information to which they are exposed, possibly reinforcing a 'knowledge gap'<sup>35</sup>.

In the print sector, there is widespread concern that increased competition for readers has increased the pressure on traditional standards of news, leading to 'tabloidization' or 'infotainment'. 'Yellow journalism' in the 1890s routinely highlighted the moral peccadilloes and sexual proclivities of the rich and famous. Sensationalism, crime and scandal in newspapers are hardly new, providing a popular alternative to the dull business of politics.<sup>36</sup> But today routine and daily front-page news about government scandals appears greater than in previous decades - whether sleaze in Britain, Tagentopoli in Italy, Recruit and Sagawa in Japan, or l'affaire Lewinsky in America<sup>37</sup>. This coverage is believed to corrode the forms of trust underpinning social relations and political authority). The process of 'tabloidization' seems to have gone further in Europe than in the American or Japanese press, with papers like *The Sun* or *Der Bild* leading the pack, each with many millions of readers. But similar phenomenon are evident in the chase for ratings in local TV news and 'all talk, all the time' cable news magazines in the U.S.

Many hope that the Internet can escape these problems, but others fear that use of the new media may serve to reinforce political cynicism. Owen and Davis conclude that the Internet provides new sources of information for the politically interested, but given uneven levels of access there are good grounds to be skeptical about its transformative potential for democratic participation<sup>38</sup>. Murdock and Golding<sup>39</sup> argue that the new medium may merely reproduce, or even exacerbate, existing social biases in conventional political participation. Hill and Hughes believe that the Internet does not change people; it simply allows them to do the same things in a different way<sup>40</sup>. Moreover with news on the Internet the speed of transmission, and the absence of gatekeepers who exercise professional standards of editorial accuracy, may produce anarchy where rumor replaces fact. The pace of breaking headlines on the net may in turn undermine journalistic standards in the old media, like the way *The Drudge Report* on the web scooped *Newsweek* in breaking the first Lewinsky story. The net also provides a platform that may exaggerate the voice of many well outside the mainstream of democratic politics, from white supremacy groups to bomb-making terrorists.

A related stream of European literature attributes the problems of political communications primarily to the practice of professional marketing. One of the most striking developments in many countries has been the declining importance of the 'pre-modern' campaign involving local party meetings, door-to-door canvassing and direct voter-candidate contact. The rise of the 'modern' campaign is characterized by the widespread adoption of the techniques of political marketing<sup>41</sup>. This process involves strategic communications with a coordinated plan which sets out party objectives, identifies target voters, establishes the battleground issues, orchestrates consistent key themes and images, prioritizes organizational and financial resources, and lays out the framework within which campaign communications operate. This is part of the 'professionalization' of campaigning, giving a greater role to technical experts in public relations, news management, advertising, speech-writing and market research<sup>42</sup>.

The rise of political marketing has been widely blamed for growing public cynicism about political leaders and institutions. The central concern is that the techniques of 'spin', selling and persuasion may have undermined the credibility of political leaders<sup>43</sup>. If everything in politics is designed for popular appeal, with 'catch-all' parties adopting whatever slogan, message or image will resonate with focus groups, then it may become harder to trust the messages or messenger. The attempt to manage the news is nothing new, but more stories are published about this process, so that the language of 'spin-doctors' and 'image consultants' has entered the popular lexicon, drawing attention to these developments. Although lacking direct evidence of public opinion, Bob Franklin provides one of the clearest statements of this thesis, decrying the 'packaging of politics', the manipulation of the public by official government advertising campaigns, and the rise of image over substance in British election campaigns<sup>44</sup>. Some regard the adoption of the techniques of strategic communications by politicians as just one more way for parties to connect with voters in modern campaigns<sup>45</sup>. Yet many others have expressed concern about the 'Americanization' of election campaigning, in Britain, Germany and Scandinavia, and the possible impact this may have had upon public confidence in political parties<sup>46</sup>. The use of 'negative' or attack advertising by parties and candidates has also raised anxieties, in America and Europe, that this practice may demobilize the electorate<sup>47</sup>.

Along related lines, Jay Blumler suggests that a 'crisis of civic communication' has afflicted Western Europe<sup>48</sup>. In increasingly complex societies, Blumler argues, governing has become more difficult, popular support more contingent, and mass communications more vital. Yet at the same time structural failures in the news media have reduced their capacity to function in a way that promotes civic communications and the public sphere. The core problem, for Blumler, lies in the more adversarial relationship that has developed between politicians and journalists. In their struggles to control the news agenda, parties have increasingly tailored their messages to journalistic formats, news values and predilections, while in response reporters have intensified their efforts to put their own stamp on the 'political story' to expose what politicians are up to. The net result, Blumler argues, has impoverished campaign coverage, such as the quality of debates about serious policy issues facing the country.

The number of skeptics questioning the evidence for all these claims has been growing in recent years. Earlier studies by the author found that, contrary to videomalaise, although TV watching was related to some signs of apathy, attention to the news media was associated with positive indicators of civic engagement, in the United States and Britain, as well as other countries<sup>49</sup>. Kenneth Newton found that in Britain reading a broadsheet newspaper or watching a lot of television news was associated with high levels of political knowledge, interest and understanding of politics<sup>50</sup>. Christina Holtz-Bacha reported similar positive effects from attention to the news media in Germany<sup>51</sup>. The most recent examination of the American NES evidence, by Stephen Earl Bennett and his colleagues, found that trust in politics and trust in the news media went hand-in-hand, with no evidence that use of the news media caused political cynicism<sup>52</sup>. But so far these voices have been published as scattered scholarly studies, and thereby drowned out by the Greek chorus of popular lament for the state of modern journalism. Claims about the negative effects of news coverage on the public, which lie at the heart of this book, deserve an extended and thorough re-examination. A chorus of voices can therefore be heard, a few optimistic, but most decrying the impact of modern political communications. Before we all jump on the videomalaise bandwagon, is the conventional critique correct? This book seeks to provide an alternative interpretation that sees recent developments in a far more positive light.

#### **The Core Argument and Structure of the Book**

The overall structure of the book can be summarized as follows. Chapter 2 considers the normative standards available to evaluate the role of the news media. Conceptions of representative democracy suggest three core roles for the news media: as a *civic forum* encouraging pluralistic debate about public affairs, as a *watchdog* guarding against the abuse of power and as a *mobilizing agent* encouraging public learning and participation in the political process. These concepts provide normative benchmarks, rooted in Schumpeterian theories of representative democracy, which can be used to compare media performance.

Chapter 3 discusses the methods available to examine how well the news media meet these standards. Three approaches have been used in the literature. Longitudinal analysis has compared trends in the contents of news coverage and public opinion at macro-level. Experimental studies and surveys have analyzed differences between groups of news users at individual-level. This chapter then outlines the research design and the sources of evidence used throughout the book. The study compares structural trends in all OECD member states, twenty-nine countries sharing similar levels of political and economic development, yet with political and media systems that differ in important regards, such as the role of public service television, levels of penetration by cable or satellite television, and regulations for election broadcasting and advertising. The aim of Part II is to see whether there are common trends transforming the news environment and campaign communications across post-industrial societies. Part III then uses content analysis and survey data comparing the effects of news exposure on civic engagement in the fifteen member states of the European Union. Since much of the videomalaise thesis originated in the United States, Chapter 13 then uses fifty years of NES data to demonstrate similar patterns in American public opinion.

### **Structural Changes in the News Industry :**

Based on this evidence, the central argument developed in this book distinguishes between the *production, contents* and *effects* of political communications. The process can be seen as a sequential systems model, from political messages, through the contents of news media coverage, to the effects upon the public (see Figure 1.1).

[Figure 1.1 about here]

Part II examines post-industrial societies to see how the structure of the news industry has evolved in response to technological, socio-economic and political developments in the post-war era. Since the 1950s, the printed press has seen greater concentration of ownership and a reduction in the number of available independent outlets, although at the same time newspaper sales have remained stable, not declined as some fear. During the 1980s public television, which had enjoyed a state monopoly throughout much of Western Europe, faced increased competition from the proliferation of new terrestrial, cable and satellite television channels. Since the mid-1990s, the explosion of the Internet has started to erode the predominance of the old media, a pattern most advanced in the US and Scandinavia. The news industry has undergone major structural changes during the second half of the twentieth century although there remain major differences between post-industrial societies, which continue to bear the imprint of their historical origins, providing important contrasts even within the Europe Union, as well as between the US and Europe.

### **The Contents of Political Coverage**

Yet it is not immediately obvious that developments in the communications environment have necessarily transformed political coverage for the worse. Commentators have expressed concern about a decline in long-term 'hard' news, such as coverage of international affairs, public policy debates, and parliament. In its place, many suggest, news has 'dumbed down' to become 'infotainment', focusing on human-interest stories about scandal, celebrities and sex. 'Tabloid' papers in Britain, the 'boulevard press' in Germany, and local television news in the US shares many characteristics.

The available comparative evidence suggests two important trends, each with important implications for claims of videomalaise. First, the new information environment has greatly expanded the opportunities to learn about public affairs in different channels, programs, formats and levels. We show that since the 1970s, the amount of news and current affairs broadcast on public service television in OECD countries more than tripled. During the last three decades the proportion of Europeans reading a newspaper everyday almost doubled, and the proportion watching television news everyday rose from one half in 1970 to almost three quarters in 1999. Access to the Internet is exploding so that by the late-1990s, about a fifth of all Europeans, and half of all Americans and Scandinavians, surf online. Getting news is one of the most popular uses of the Internet in the US and Europe. In short, news consumption is up. We often generalize based on the American literature but the U.S. is exceptionally low in consumption of newspapers and TV news. Moreover formats have diversified from the standard flagship

evening news programs and current affairs programs, incorporating 24-hour rolling news, on-the-hour radio headlines, TV magazines and talk shows, as well as the panoply of online news sources. It has become easier to bump into the news, almost accidentally, than ever before, broadening the audience.

Second, rather than an inexorable downwards erosion in the standards of serious journalism, which has been termed the 'tabloidization' of news, or the growth of 'infotainment', it seems more accurate to understand trends during the 1980s and 1990s as representing a *diversification* of the marketplace in terms of levels, formats and topics. Soft news and 'infotainment' has undoubtedly grown in some sectors of the market, but serious coverage of political events, international affairs, and financial news has also steadily expanded in availability elsewhere. Endless Senate debates shown on *C-Span* coexist today with endless debates about sex and personal relationships on the *Jerry Springer Show*. *The Sun* sits on the same newsstands as *The Economist*. [News.bbc.co.uk](http://News.bbc.co.uk) is as easily available as Amsterdam pornography sites. Diversification does not mean that the whole of society is being progressively 'dumbed down' by changes in the news media. By focusing only on excesses in the popular end of the market, such as the wasteland of endless punditry on American cable TV talk shows, we overlook dramatic changes such as the ability to watch live legislative debate, to witness Kosovo refugees at the moment they crossed the border, or to find online information about local government services. Potentially diversification may lead to another danger, namely greater divisions between the information haves and have-nots. But we also demonstrate that in fact the audience for news has greatly expanded in size and broadened socially during the last quarter-century, not narrowed.

The evidence remains limited and systematic data is lacking to confirm or deny whether other assumed long-term changes in the news culture have occurred in post-industrial societies, for example whether there has been a growth in negative coverage of politicians during election campaigns, or whether a more adversarial relationship has developed between journalists and governments. The available studies, however, strongly suggests that changes in journalism observed in particular countries are often highly contextual, rather than representing trends common across post-industrial societies. For example, the most comprehensive comparison of news cultures in twenty-one countries, based on surveys of journalists, found almost no consensus about professional roles, ethical values and journalistic norms<sup>53</sup>. Rather than the emergence of a single prevalent model of journalism, based on American norms, this suggests considerable diversity worldwide.

Political campaigns have been transformed by changes in the news industry, and also by the widespread adoption of political marketing techniques. Other countries have not simply imported American campaigning practices lock, stock and barrel. But politicians in many democracies are often paying more attention to formal feedback mechanisms like polls and focus groups, with an expanding role for campaign professionals from marketing and public relations. Comparative surveys have found that in a 'shopping' model, parties adopt whatever techniques seem well suited for their particular environment, supplementing but not discarding older forms of electioneering. Even in America, traditional forms of grassroots voter contact have been

maintained, alongside older forms of campaign communications. Rather than decrying the professionalization of political communications, and the 'black arts of spin doctors', this development can be regarded as an extension of the democratic process *if* these techniques help to connect parties more closely with the concerns of the electorate. The key issue is less the increased deployment of marketing techniques per se, which is not in dispute, than their effects upon politicians and voters, which is.

### **The Impact on Civic Engagement**

This brings us to the issue at the heart of the book: whether changes in political communications have contributed towards civic malaise. The fundamental flaw in accounts of videomalaise is less the claims about trends in the news industry and campaigns, or claims about trends in the contents of political coverage, than the assumptions about the audience. Theories of videomalaise argue that exposure to the news media discourages learning about politics, erodes trust in political leaders and government institutions, and dampens political mobilization. The net result, it is argued by proponents, has been a decline in active democratic citizenship.

Part III of the book presents extensive evidence from a battery of surveys in Europe and the United States, as well as experiments in Britain, that cast strong doubt upon these claims. Instead this book argues that, contrary to the videomalaise hypothesis, use of the news media is positively associated with a wide range of indicators of political knowledge, trust, and mobilization. People who watch more TV news, read more newspapers, surf the net, and pay attention to campaigns, are consistently more knowledgeable, trusting of government, and participatory. Far from a case of 'American exceptionalism', this pattern is found in Europe and the United States. Repeated tests using different datasets, in different countries, across different time-periods during the last half-century, confirm this positive relationship, even after controlling for factors that characterize the news audience like their education and prior political interest. The public is not simply passively responding to political communications being presented to them, in a naive 'stimulus-response' model, instead they are critically and actively sifting, discarding and interpreting the available information. A more educated and literate public is capable of using the more complex range of news sources and party messages to find the information they need to make practical political choices.

Why should we consistently find a positive link between civic engagement and attention to the news media? There are three possible answers.

One interpretation is that those who are most predisposed to participate (for whatever reason) could well be more interested in keeping up with current affairs in the news, so the direction of causation could be one-way, from attitudes to use of the news media. This view is consistent with the 'uses and gratification' literature, which suggests that uses of the mass media reflect prior predispositions in the audience: people who love football turn to the sports results, people who invest in Wall Street check the business pages, and people interested in politics read op eds about government and public policy<sup>54</sup>.

Another answer could be that the process of watching or reading about public affairs (for whatever reason) increases our interest in, and knowledge about, government and politics, thereby facilitating political participation. The more we watch or read, in this interpretation, the more we learn. News habits can be caused by many factors such as leisure patterns and broadcasting schedules: people may catch the news because it comes on after a popular sit-com, or because radio stations air headline news between music clips, or because the household subscribes to home delivery of a newspaper. In this view, the direction of causality would again be one-way, but in this case running from prior news habits to our subsequent political attitudes and knowledge.

Both these views could logically make sense of the associations we establish. One or the other could be true. It is not possible to resolve the direction of causality from cross-sectional surveys taken at one point in time. But it seems more plausible and convincing to assume a two way-interactive process. The conclusion argues that in the long-term, like the socialization process in the family or workplace, there may well be a 'virtuous circle' where the news media and party campaigns serve to activate the active. Those most interested and knowledgeable pay most attention to political news. Learning more about public affairs reduces the barriers to further civic engagement. In this interpretation, the ratchet of reinforcement thereby moves in a direction that is healthy for democratic participation.

In contrast, the news media has far less power to reinforce the disengagement of the disengaged, because, given the easy availability of the multiple alternatives now available, and minimal political interest, when presented with news about politics and current affairs this group is habitually more likely to turn over, turn off, or surf to another web page. If the disengaged do catch the news, they are likely to pay little attention. And if they do pay attention, they are more likely to mistrust media sources of information. Repeatedly tuning out political messages inoculates against their potential impact. This theory provides a plausible and coherent interpretation of the different pieces of the puzzle found in this study.

To substantiate this argument the study uses a multi-method research design and multiple datasets. Trends in the structure of the news industry rely primarily upon data from UNESCO since 1945, the most authoritative source monitoring worldwide patterns of news consumption and output. To understand the pattern of news coverage, the analysis draws upon systematic content analysis of newspapers and television news in the mid-1990s in the fifteen member states of the EU. To compare public opinion we draw on the 30-year series of Eurobarometer surveys produced by the European Commission. These surveys provide a rich resource monitoring public opinion from 1970 to 1999 in EU member states. They measure use of newspapers, television and radio news, and more recently the Internet, as well as attention to political campaigns, and indicators of political knowledge, trust and mobilization. To partially unravel the complex issue of the direction of causality the book draws on experimental research on the effects of positive and negative television news conducted in Britain, involving over 1000 subjects.

For the American analysis, chapters draw on a half-century of National Election Surveys in the United States, running from 1948 to 1998. Because so much of the videomalaise literature is American, we

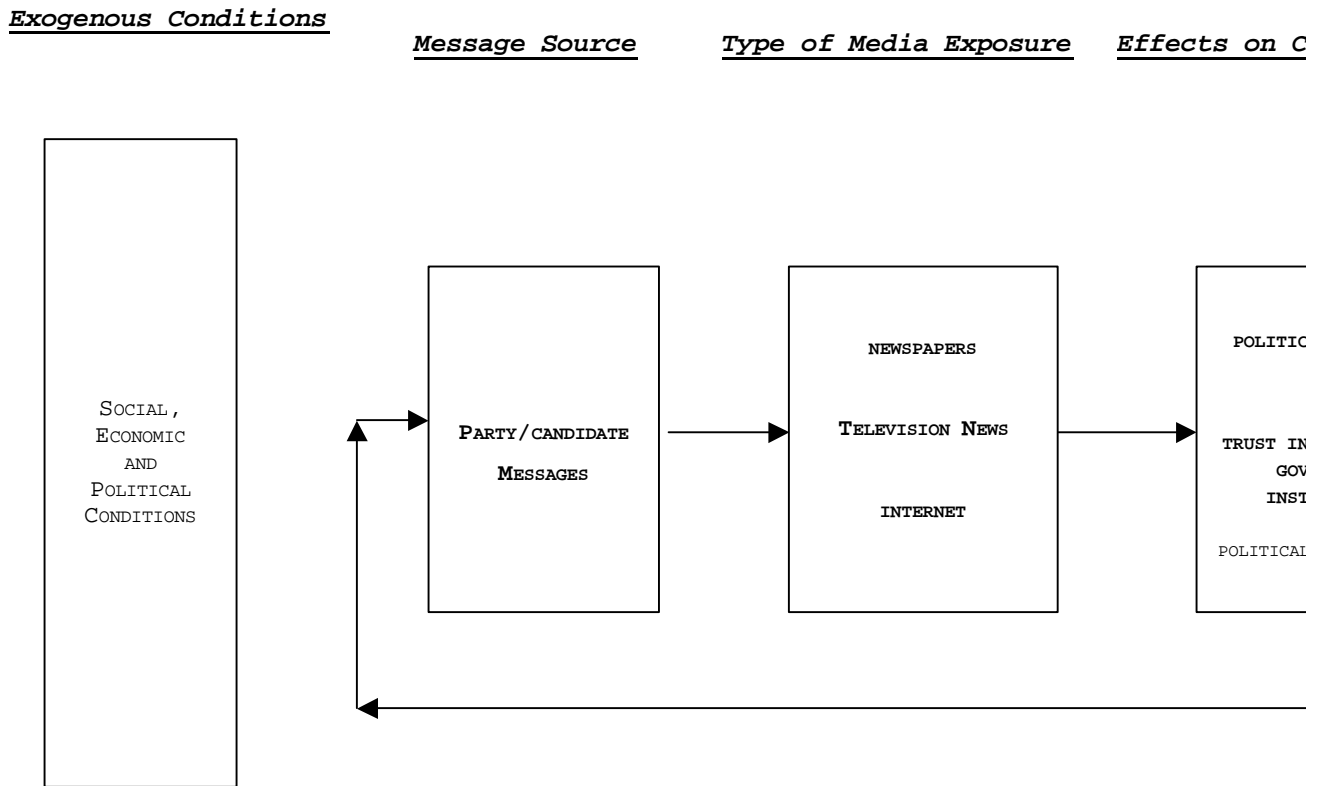
pay particular attention to examining both specific and diffuse effects in this country. At individual level, as in Europe, Americans most exposed to the news media prove the most politically knowledgeable, active and trusting. At diffuse-level, the timing of long-term trends across a range of indicators of civic engagement since the early 1950s fail to fit videomalaise accounts. Instead patterns show either broad stability over time (such as in attention to election news and campaign activism) or a temporary plateau in the heated politics of the 1960s, preceded and followed by slightly lower levels (such as in turnout for presidential elections and political interest). There is little evidence for civic malaise in America, according to these indicators, let alone malaise caused by change in the culture of the news media.

For reasons explained in subsequent chapters, claims of videomalaise are methodologically flawed so that they are at best unproven, to use the Scottish verdict, or at worse false. As a result too often we are 'blaming the messenger' for more deep-rooted ills of the body politic. This matters, not just because we need to understand the real causes of civic disengagement to advance our knowledge, but also because the correct diagnosis has serious implications for public policy choices. This is especially important in newer democracies struggling to institutionalize a free press in the transition from authoritarian rule. 'Blaming the messenger' can prove a deeply conservative strategy, blocking effective institutional reforms, especially in a culture like America that idealizes protection of the press from public regulation.

This book does not seek to claim that all is for the best in the best of all possible political worlds. If not 'broken', there are many deep-rooted flaws embedded in the core institutions of representative democracy; we are not seeking to present a Panglossian view. To name but a few of the current challenges to democracy, corruption, venality and instability in Russia threatens to undermine fragile electoral gains. In America, the sea of political money, the unending campaign, combined with legislative do-nothingism, fails to serve the public. In the European Union, the lack of transparency and accountability in the policymaking process, and the growing powers and scope of EU institutions, causes a worrying disconnect with the European public. Ethnic conflict, violence and intense poverty continues to plague many emerging democracies in Africa. Worldwide, women's voices continue to under-represented in the decision-making process. These and many other urgent political problems have deep-seated structural causes. If we stopped blaming the news media's coverage of these events, and directed attention to the problems themselves, perhaps remedies would be more forthcoming. The videomalaise thesis is not just misleading; it is also deeply conservative. The concluding chapter summarizes the core findings, expands on the theory of a virtuous circle, and considers the implications for public policy and for strengthening democratic governance.

Chapter from Pippa Norris "A Virtuous Circle: Political Communications in Post-Industrial Societies." (Harvard University Press, Fall 2000)

Figure 1.1: The Schematic Model of Political Communications



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<sup>1</sup> See Pippa Norris. 1999. *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Governance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Nye, Jr, Philip Zelikow and David King. 1997. *Why People Don't Trust Government*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; Everett Carll Ladd and Karlyn H. Bowman. 1998. *What's Wrong? A Survey of American Satisfaction and Complaint*. Washington, DC: AEI Press.

<sup>3</sup> Jack Hayward. 1995. *The Crisis of Representation in Europe*. London: Frank Cass; Svein S. Andersen and Kjell A. Eliassen. 1996. *The European Union: How Democratic is It?* London: Sage.

<sup>4</sup> See Pippa Norris, ed. *Critical Citizens. Global Support for Democratic Governance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>5</sup> This study focuses on the effects of news journalism and therefore excludes sociological theories that are concerned primarily with the impact of watching television *entertainment* on matters like social trust, community engagement and voluntary activism. For a discussion see Robert Putnam. 1995. 'Tuning In, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America'. *PS: Political Science and Politics*. 28(December): 664-83.

<sup>6</sup> James Curran and Jean Seaton. 1991. *Power Without Responsibility: The Press and Broadcasting in Britain*. London: Routledge.

<sup>7</sup> See Shearon A. Lowery and Melvin L. DeFleur. 1995. *Milestones in Mass Communication Research*. New York: Longman.

<sup>8</sup> Steven Starker. 1991. *Evil Empires: Crusading Against the Mass Media*. London: Transaction.

<sup>9</sup> Kurt Lang and Gladys Lang. 1966. 'The Mass Media and Voting'. In *Reader in Public Opinion and Communication* edited by Bernard Berelson and M. Janowitz. New York: Free Press. According to the Langs: "Television's style in chronicling political events can affect the fundamental orientation of the voter towards his government...The media, we contend, can stir up in individuals defensive reactions by their emphasis on crisis and conflict in lieu of clarifying normal decision-making processes."

<sup>10</sup> Michael Robinson. 1976. 'Public Affairs Television and the Growth of Political Malaise: The Case of "the Selling of the President".' *American Political Science Review*. 70(3): 409-32 P.425.

<sup>11</sup> Michael J. Robinson and Margaret A. Sheehan. 1983. *Over the Wire and on TV: CBS and UPI in Campaign '80*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

<sup>12</sup> Lee Becker, Idowu A. Sobowale and William Casey, Jr. 1979. 'Newspaper and Television Dependencies: Effects on Evaluations of Public Officials.' *Journal of Broadcasting*. 23(4): 465-75; Lee Becker, and D. Charles Whitney. 1980. 'Effects of Media Dependencies: Audience Assessment of Government.' *Communication Research*. 7(1):95-120; Jack McLeod, Jane D. Brown, Lee B. Becker, and Dean A. Ziemke. 1977. 'Decline and fall at the White House: A Longitudinal Analysis of Communication Effects.' *Communication Research*. 4:3-22; Arthur Miller, Edie H. Goldenberg, and Lutz Erbring. 1979. 'Set-type Politics: The Impact of Newspapers on Public Confidence.' *American Political Science Review*. 73: 67-84.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington and Joji Watanuki. 1975. *The Crisis of Democracy*. New York: New York University Press.

<sup>14</sup> George Gerbner and Larry Gross. 1976. 'Living with Television: the Violence Profile'. *Journal of Communication* 16(2): 173-199; George Gerbner, Larry

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Gross, Michael Morgan and Nancy Signorielli. 1982. 'Charting the Mainstream: Television's Contribution to Political Orientations.' *Journal of Communication*. 32(2): 100-27; George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan and Nancy Signorielli. 1984. 'Political Correlates of Television Viewing.' *Public Opinion Quarterly*. 48(1): 283-300; George Gerbner. 1990. 'Advancing on the Path of Righteousness'. In *Cultivation Analysis: New Directions in Media Effects Research* edited by N. Signorielli and M. Morgan. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

<sup>15</sup> Austin Ranney. 1983. *Channels of Power: The Impact of Television on American Politics*. Washington, DC: AEI. P.86-7.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Entman. 1989. *Democracy without Citizens: Media and the Decay of American Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>17</sup> Neil Postman. 1985. *Entertaining Ourselves to Death*. New York: Viking.

<sup>18</sup> Roderick Hart. 1994. *Seducing America*. New York: Oxford University Press; Roderick Hart. 1996. 'Easy Citizenship: Television's Curious Legacy'. In *The Media and Politics*, edited by Kathleen Hall Jamieson. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. Volume 546.

<sup>19</sup> Neil Gabler. 1998. *Life the Movie*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

<sup>20</sup> Larry Sabato. 1988. *Feeding Frenzy: How Attack Journalism has Transformed American Politics*. New York: Free Press.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas E. Patterson. 1993. *Out of Order*. New York: Vintage; Thomas E. Patterson. 1996. 'Bad News, Bad Governance'. In *The Media and Politics*, edited by Kathleen Hall Jamieson. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. Volume 546.

<sup>22</sup> Michael J. Robinson and Margaret A. Sheehan. 1983. *Over the Wire and on TV: CBS and UPI in Campaign '80*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

<sup>23</sup> Joseph N. Cappella and Kathleen H. Jamieson. 1996. 'News Frames, Political Cynicism and Media Cynicism'. In *The Media and Politics*, edited by Kathleen Hall Jamieson. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. Volume 546; Joseph N. Cappella and Kathleen H. Jamieson. 1997. *Spiral of Cynicism: The Press and the Public Good*. New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>24</sup> Kenneth Dautrich and Thomas H. Hartley. *How the News Media Fail American Voters: Causes, Consequences and Remedies*. New York: Columbia University Press.

<sup>25</sup> James Fallows. 1996. *Breaking the News*. New York: Pantheon Books.

<sup>26</sup> Michael Schudson. 1995. *The Power of News*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

<sup>27</sup> William A. Hachten. 1998. *The Troubles of Journalism*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Pippa Norris. 1997. 'News of the World'. In Pippa Norris (ed). *Politics and the Press*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner; Hamid Mowlana. 1997. *Global Information and World Communication*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. London: Sage.

<sup>29</sup> Marvin Kalb. 1998. 'The Rise of the New News'. *Discussion Paper D-34*. Cambridge, MA: The Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, John F. Kennedy School of Government.

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- <sup>30</sup> William F. Baker and George Dessart. 1998. *Down the Tube*. New York: Basic Books.
- <sup>31</sup> *Striking the Balance: Audience Interests, Business Pressures and Journalists' Values*. 1999. Washington, DC: The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press.
- <sup>32</sup> Y. Achille and J. I. Bueno. 1994. *Les televisions publiques en quete d'avenir*. Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble.
- <sup>33</sup> Jurgen Habermas. 1984. *The Theory of Communicative Action*. London: Heinemann; Jurgen Habermas. 1998. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; Peter Dahlgren and Colin Sparks. 1995. *Communication and Citizenship*. London: Routledge; Peter Dahlgren. 1995. *Television and the Public Sphere*. London: Sage; Tony Weymouth and Bernard Lamizet. 1996. *Markets and Myths: Forces for Change in European Media*. London: Longman.
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- <sup>37</sup> James Lull and Stephen Hinerman. 1997. *Media Scandals*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- <sup>38</sup> Diane Owen and Richard Davis. 1998. *New Media and American Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press. P.185.
- <sup>39</sup> Graham Murdock and Peter Golding. 1989. 'Information Poverty and Political Inequality: Citizenship in the Age of Privatised Communications.' *Journal of Communication*. 39: 180-193.
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- <sup>41</sup> David Swanson and Paolo Mancini. 1996. *Politics, Media and Modern Democracy*. New York: Praeger; David Butler and Austin Ranney. 1992. *Electioneering*. Oxford: Clarendon Press; Shaun Bowler and David Farrell. 1992. *Electoral Strategies and Political Marketing*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- <sup>42</sup> For a study of this process in Britain see Pippa Norris, John Curtice, David Sanders, Margaret Scammell and Holli A. Semetko. 1999. *On Message: Communicating the Campaign*. London: Sage; Pippa Norris. 1997. 'Political Communications.' In *Developments in British Politics 5* edited by Patrick Dunleavy, Andrew Gamble, Ian Holliday and Gillian Peele. Basingtoke: Macmillan.
- <sup>43</sup> See, for example, Nicholas Jones. 1995. *Soundbites and Spin Doctors*. London: Cassell; Martin Rosenbaum. 1997. *From Soapbox to Soundbite: Party Political Campaigning since 1945*. London: Macmillan.
- <sup>44</sup> Bob Franklin. 1994. *Packaging Politics*. London: Edward Arnold.
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<sup>48</sup> Jay G. Blumler and Michael Gurevitch. 1995. *The Crisis of Public Communication*. London: Longman. See also Jay Blumler. 1990. 'Elections, the Media and the Modern Publicity Process'. In *Public Communication: The New Imperatives* edited by M. Ferguson. London: Sage; Jay G. Blumler. 1997. 'Origins of the Crisis of Communication for Citizenship'. *Political Communication*, 14(4): 395-404.

<sup>49</sup> Pippa Norris. 1996. 'Does Television Erode Social Capital? A Reply to Putnam.' *P.S.: Political Science and Politics* XXIX(3); Pippa Norris. 1997. *Electoral Change since 1945*. Oxford: Blackwell; Pippa Norris. 2000. 'Television and Civic Malaise.' In *What's Troubling the Trilateral Democracies*, eds. Susan J. Pharr and Robert D. Putnam. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; Pippa Norris, John Curtice, David Sanders, Margaret Scammell and Holli Semetko. 1999. *On Message*. London: Sage.

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<sup>51</sup> Christina Holtz-Bacha. 1990. 'Videomalaise Revisited: Media Exposure and Political Alienation in West Germany.' *European Journal of Communication*. 5: 73-85.

<sup>52</sup> See Stephen Earl Bennett, Staci L. Rhine, Richard S. Flickinger and Linda L.M. Bennett. 1999. 'Videomalaise Revisited: Reconsidering the relation between the public's view of the media and trust in government.' *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 4(4): XXX-XXX.

<sup>53</sup> The surveys of journalists found no consensus about the relative importance of providing analytical coverage, acting as government watchdogs, serving public entertainment, and reporting accurately or objectively. For example, the proportion of journalists who thought that their role as watchdog of government was 'very' or 'extremely' important ranged from 33% in Germany, and 67% in the US, to 88% in Britain. See David H. Weaver. 1998. *The Global Journalist: News People Around the World*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press. Pp.466-7.

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