

Chapter 10

Knows Little? Practical Information and Choice

To assess what the public learns from the news media we need to establish suitable benchmarks for political knowledge. Three perspectives are common in the literature. The 'civics' approach assumes a single narrow type of 'ideal' information about government and public policy that all citizens need to know. The 'relativist' stance acknowledges that people have a limited reservoir of political information but suggests that this is sufficient for people to cast a meaningful ballot. The preferable strategy in our view is to understand what practical knowledge citizens need to make informed judgments about the consequences of their actions in multiple roles, for example as claimants of welfare benefits, as consumers of genetically modified food, or as activists concerned about global warming, in addition to their role as electors. Some judgments involve daunting information hurdles; in others the demands are fairly minimal. Some occur sporadically, like voting, others involve people's daily lives.

Based on this conceptualization we explore the role of newspapers, radio, and television in the practical knowledge which European citizens acquire within five different contexts, each progressively more abstract. These include the public's awareness of social issues like the personal health risks from skin cancer; economic issues such as the single European currency (the euro); citizens' rights within the European Union; general knowledge about the institutions and functions of the European Union; and understanding of party policies in elections to the European Parliament. When asked where they look for information about the European Union, people most commonly cite television (60%), newspapers (41%) and the radio (24%). Far fewer say that they acquire information from sources like personal discussions, public libraries or information centers (see Figure 10.1).

The study demonstrates that the public does indeed learn from the news in many important ways, even after controlling for factors like prior education and political interest. Europeans who used the news media acquired more practical information across all five dimensions of political knowledge and Chapter 12 confirms that similar patterns are evident in the United States. Far from 'dumbing down' the public, as videomalaise theories suggest, the analysis shows that the news media contributes positively towards civic education.

The Civics Fallacy

To develop this argument we can start by considering how we conceptualize and measure political knowledge. The most common view, derived from classical liberal theories of representative government, defines 'political' fairly narrowly to the governmental or electoral context. This view assumes that in order to make a rational electoral decision, voters need some general understanding about the rules of the game or how the political system operates; information about the major policy proposals of the main contenders for office; and familiarity with the government's record¹. A long tradition in cognitive psychology has explored what voters learn from election campaigns in general, and from the news media in particular. Following the earliest scientific polls of public opinion, and the pioneering work of Paul Lazarsfeld², much of the literature has stressed the breadth and depth of citizen's ignorance about public affairs and minimal retention of factual

political knowledge from exposure to the news³, although more recent work has revised this picture⁴.

The most recent comprehensive survey of the available research in the United States, by Delli Carpini and Keeter, focuses on three dimensions of political knowledge: the rules of the game (what government is), the substance of politics (what government does), and people and parties (who government is). The study demonstrates that most people 'failed' against standard 'civics' tests, such as correctly identifying the name of the Speaker of the House, the role and powers of the Supreme Court, and the term of office served by US Senators⁵. Moreover, despite a substantial expansion in educational levels, and the growth in the availability of the mass media, the study found American citizens to be no better informed about politics today than half a century ago. There is also a significant 'knowledge gap', representing major disparities between the 'information-rich' and the 'information-poor', with the latter concentrated among poorer groups. Knowledge of foreign policy is usually particularly low, indicated by measures such as being able to identify international leaders or even other countries⁶. Another study examined what the public learnt during the year-long campaign in the 1997 British general election, in terms of identifying the party most strongly in favor of six different policy issues like electoral reform or independence for Scotland, and found that the public acquired no information about these issues despite extensive coverage of politics during the year-long campaign⁷.

Based on these findings, many commonly assume that the news media are largely to blame for public ignorance. The problem, some suggest, lies in neglect of substantive policy issues in favour of stories about opinion polls and campaign strategy⁸, the personal characteristics of political leaders, and editorial punditry. Lichter and Smith's critical conclusions about coverage of the 1996 US Presidential election exemplifies this approach: *"The results of this study raise disturbing questions about the nature and quality of the political reporting provided by television network news...Although coverage of the 1996 primary campaign was extensive, it was dominated by discussion of the horse race and other non-substantive topics. Reports featuring policy issues were relatively uncommon and tended to be both brief and superficial, with discussions far more likely to include an interpretation of the political implications of a candidate's platform than any details about its specific nature or substantive effects..Far from aiding the democratic process, it (the coverage) may further erode public confidence in the political process and in mainstream journalism as well."*⁹

But this common view involves the fallacy of regarding the news media as analogous to a third-grade civics teacher. The relevant question is what practical knowledge is necessary to cast an 'informed' ballot¹⁰. As argued earlier in Chapter 2, in our view the capacity to make reasoned electoral choices does not require full, comprehensive and encyclopedic information about every detail of each party's manifesto policies, the government's record, nor does it necessarily require comprehensive knowledge of textbook 'civics'. People do not need to be able to recite each party's detailed proposals on matters like health care, or the name of government ministers, or even the names of their local candidates. Citizens would quickly sink from information overload if they attempted to meet these conditions. It may be intrinsically worthwhile to know about these matters, for its own

sake, but the standards of analytical knowledge about the causes of phenomenon, widespread in scholarship, are not the same as the standards for practical knowledge about the consequences of decisions, required in the political world. Just as drivers do not need to know the principles of mechanics or even how a spark plug works, to accelerate a car, so citizens do not need to plumb the depths of how a bill becomes law to understand the probable consequences of their political decisions.

The Relativist Fallacy

Recognizing widespread public ignorance about the basic facts of political life, recent work by John Zaller and Samuel Popkin has focused on the role of cognitive short cuts such as ideology or 'schema' that reduce the time and effort required to monitor the candidates and allow a reasoned choice with imperfect information¹¹. In this view citizens are capable of making good low-information decisions because the costs of keeping fully informed are high whereas the rewards for engaging in politics in contemporary democracies are low. Others have emphasized the limited but still significant acquisition of information about candidates and issues derived from exposure to the news in an election campaign so that gains in knowledge, even if modest, may be sufficient to allow voters to cast a meaningful ballot. Neuman, Just and Crigler argue that people use the messages they receive from the news media to construct political meanings which allows them to play the role of active and informed citizens: "They (voters) actively filter, sort, and reorganize information in personally meaningful ways in the process of constructing an understanding of public issues."¹².

Yet if citizens can construct meanings from the campaign, this does not necessarily mean that they thereby possess political knowledge unless these constructions bear some resemblance to 'reality'. The danger of the relativist notion is to assume that any beliefs which voters use to help them come to judgment, whether true or false, are the equivalent of knowledge. The distinction between knowledge and belief needs to rest on the Popperian understanding that the latter has to be subject to some external test of verifiability or falsifiability¹³. If voters believe that, for example, crime figures are rising when trends show that the number of incidents is actually falling, if they think that the British Labour party is more likely to support independence for Scotland than the SNP¹⁴, or if they believed that in the 1992 election President Clinton was more experienced in foreign affairs than Senator Dole, then in all likelihood voters are probably factually wrong in these judgments, and not just in trivial ways¹⁵. One American survey found that in mid-summer 1999 most people were unaware that rates of violent crime and teen pregnancy had fallen in recent years, while nearly half the country did not know that the economy was growing¹⁶. The pollster Humphrey Taylor attributed American misperceptions of social and economic trends to local TV: "*A nightly diet of crime and other bad news on local TV has created a badly misinformed public who just do not recognize how good these times are.*"¹⁷ If people evaluate the performance of the candidates and parties in elections on this basis, these misperceptions may lead to serious errors of judgment.

Practical Knowledge

So if the 'civics test' and the 'relativist notions' are flawed conceptions of political knowledge in a democracy, what is the alternative? Our argument assumes that in its role as civic forum the news media system needs to provide sufficient information so that citizens can estimate the probable risks and benefits of their decisions. In this view, people need practical knowledge to connect their political and social preferences to the available options¹⁸.

Practical knowledge is situational, so that the type of political information that proves most useful depends upon the context. For example, information about the government's record and party policies on the major issues can prove essential in general elections. Yet in other contexts, such as presidential primaries, the most useful information may concern the personal characteristics of the candidates. Faced with referenda proposals, voters may need issue information to assess the risks and benefits of complex policy options. Yet in other situations, opinion poll data can prove invaluable, providing information about the relative ranking of the candidates and parties to guide tactical voting choices. Understanding the campaign strategies adopted by parties may help voters to weigh, sift and evaluate the reliability of manifesto promises. Editorial commentary and partisan cues, rather than simply 'straight news' or factual issue information, may help waverers decide. Commentators often decry the tendency for news to cover 'soft' topics, like 'the health beat'. But in their daily lives people may need practical information about the health risks from contaminated foods, their welfare rights at benefits offices, or how they can claim legal redress for grievances. In short, citizens' ability to make informed choices varies by context. If we accept that 'the personal is the political', then being deprived of 'soft' information about the dangers of cancer from pesticides can be just as important, if not more so, than being deprived of 'hard' information about the government's proposals on welfare reform or distant events in Kosovo. In representative democracies most people are probably powerless to influence social or foreign policy, outside of casting their vote in the electoral arena every few years, but they can decide which fruit and vegetables to consume every day of their lives.

Learning from the News

Given these assumptions, what do people learn in different contexts and, in particular, what is the role of the news media in this process? We can examine comparative evidence drawn from the Fall 1996 Eurobarometer conducted in the 15 member states. Following the approach of Delli Carpini and Keeter¹⁹, we assume that people learn about a subject if they have the ability, motivation and opportunity to do so. Cognitive skills, particularly prior education, should facilitate further learning. The logic is that the more we know, for example about European history, the easier it is to acquire and to make sense of new information, such as events in Kosovo. Motivation drives the desire and willingness to learn, including whether we pay attention to new information provided by conversations with friends, classroom teachers, or newspaper columns. Lastly, the structure of opportunities concerns the availability of information and how easy or difficult it is for a person to learn about a topic, given his or her ability and motivation. The denser the information environment, with a proliferation of media

sources, outlets and levels, the easier it is to learn. But a mere proliferation of news without any prior cognitive guideposts or interest can produce information overload and a situation of 'blooming, buzzing' confusion. This conceptualization is analytically useful although it rarely relates in a simple one-to-one fashion with specific characteristics. Civics education, for example, can influence both a person's abilities (skills) and their motivation (interest).

We can develop an analytical model predicting political knowledge based on structural, attitudinal, and media-related factors. 'Structural' variables include the usual socioeconomic indicators such as age, sex, education, and income. Educational background, in particular, is usually strongly associated with the cognitive and analytical skills required for learning. We have already noted in earlier chapters how age, gender and social status relate to distinct patterns of media use, like exposure to television and the Internet. 'Attitudinal' factors include left-right ideology, political interest (measured by political discussion with friends and colleagues), and attitudes towards the European Union. We assume that the pro-Europeans will be more interested than Euroskeptics in following EU events and issues. Many have found political interest and involvement to be one of the strongest predictors of media use and attention²⁰. People interested in public affairs use the available media more purposefully²¹.

'Media-exposure' factors include regular use of television news, daily newspapers, and radio news, as well as use of the Internet²². Newspapers require greater effort than television, and some suggest they provide more information²³, although other recent American studies argue that television news may be a more important source of political learning than the printed press²⁴. In this study we draw on a distinction between long and short-term media effects. Without experiments we are unable to examine the short-term impact of reading a particular story about the euro or watching a television documentary about the Commission. The evidence from panel surveys that is available, within the intensive information environment provided by the year-long 1997 British campaign, suggests that the short-term influence of exposure to the news media on awareness of public policy issues proved negligible²⁵. Nevertheless long-term or cumulative media effects can be analyzed from cross-sectional surveys by comparing differences between groups of media users, such as whether regular readers of the press prove more informed than non-readers, after controlling for factors like prior education and interest. We cannot prove that any persistent differences are a result of patterns of media attention per se, but, as argued elsewhere, this seems like a plausible assumption. While the more educated may possess cognitive skills which facilitate reading newspapers, or watching the news, at the same time long-term repeated or habitual exposure to the news can be expected to make people better informed, in a virtuous circle. In this regard, the role of the news media is no different from the socialization process experienced in the home, school, workplace or community. The key issue this study explores is therefore whether the long-term pattern of media exposure helps to predict political knowledge, after controlling for a wide range of structural and attitudinal variables. This chapter focuses on the comparative evidence in Europe and Chapter 12 picks up this question again in the American context.

Dimensions of Political Knowledge

Given our broad conceptualization, five measures of knowledge were selected from the 1996 Eurobarometer survey to represent distinct contexts and progressively more abstract types of information. Each can be regarded as broadly 'political', informing different aspects of citizenship, although only some relate more narrowly to government and elections per se. Standardized 100-point scales were used for comparability across dimensions.

Social Issues: The Risks of Cancer

The first concerns public awareness of social issues that are important for personal health and well being, such as those featured in public information campaigns about the risks of AIDS, food safety, drugs in the workplace, the link between smoking and cancer, and the consumption of alcohol before driving. Information about such issues is both important and practical, since it affects everyday lives. The selected issue tested in the 1996 survey concerned levels of public knowledge about the effects of exposure to the sun on skin cancer. The EU had been conducting an information campaign around this issue, called 'Europe Against Cancer', through paid media and the press. If political communication is understood as a two-way process, in which political leaders are trying to influence the public at the same time as citizens are seeking to influence government, then we need to explore whether government information campaigns actually can make a difference. The question we can explore is whether the public who were most attentive to the news media proved most informed about this issue. Knowledge of the risks of skin cancer was tested by 27 items monitoring whether people were aware of the risks related to sun exposure. The public was asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the following types of statement: "*Some moles can develop into skin cancer*", "*The sun is most dangerous for people with fair complexions*", and "*If the sun is covered by clouds, there is no risk of being exposed or getting sunburnt.*" (See Appendix 10A for details).

Economic Issues: the euro

Knowledge of economic issues could encompass a wide range of indicators, ranging from the most abstract (information about GATT or the role of the World Bank) down to the most prosaic (information about whether everyday prices were rising or falling in the shops). In this study, information about the economy was examined in terms of awareness of the single European currency. As discussed in chapter 8, the issue of economic and monetary union had received extensive coverage in the news media in the period before the Eurobarometer survey. The previous year, in December 1995, the new currency had been officially termed the 'euro' by the Madrid Council. There was widespread debate in the press about the budgetary and economic conditions for membership and speculation about whether weaker countries like Italy and Greece would meet the necessary requirement to enter the euro-zone. Plans for monetary union continued at the March 1996 Turin Council and the June 1996 Florence Council. The issue of monetary union has many dimensions, some very abstract, but at a practical level the public needs to be aware of the implications of the new notes and coins, due to be introduced in January 2002, including information about such matters as bank charges for exchanging old currency, the conversion rate of exchange, the schedule for the changeover, and the implications

for comparing prices and purchasing goods in another EU member state. The transfer to the euro will eventually reach into everyone's lives within the EU, especially within the 11-member euro-zone. Knowledge about monetary union is also important in terms of public participation in the policy process in countries like the UK and Sweden where the issue of eventual membership in the euro-zone remains under debate. The evidence from Euroinion tracking surveys shows that in spring 1996 less than half the public (46%) could correctly identify the 'euro' as the name of the single currency, but by spring 1998 over three-quarters (78%) could do so²⁶. Knowledge of the name of the currency proved twice as high (87%) in the EU-11 countries that joined the euro-zone than in member states that stayed out (44%). The Eurobarometer survey monitored practical knowledge about the euro using five factual items, such as whether the euro will need to be converted into the currency of another participating member state in order to pay for goods and services in that country (see Appendix 10a).

Citizenship Rights

The dimension of citizenship rights represents another form of practical knowledge. The Eurobarometer survey examined whether citizens knew about their legal rights using a series of ten true/false items concerning issues like the right to work, travel, study or claim benefits in another EU member state, or to travel around Europe without showing a passport or identity card. The survey also included 10 items monitoring whether people had heard of matters like the right to reimbursement for urgent medical expenses anywhere in the EU, to equal treatment at work without sex discrimination, to health and safety at work, and to vote or stand as a candidate in local and European elections for residents in any EU country. If people are unaware of these rights this limits their ability to seek legal redress. Much of the work of the EU has focused on these issues. The 1992 Single European Act aimed to eliminate physical, technical and fiscal frontiers between member states, to reduce regional inequalities, to harmonize rules governing working conditions, to strengthen research and development, to protect the environment, and to facilitate monetary cooperation. The Maastricht Treaty in 1992, and the Amsterdam Treaty in 1996, strengthens political as well as economic union. Widespread ignorance about the rights established by these treaties limits the practical effects of these initiatives.

EU Institutions

At an even more abstract level, some grasp of EU institutions is required to understand the relationship between the EU Parliament, Commission and Council of Ministers, as well as the linkages between EU governance and domestic governments. By the 'civics' standard ideally people should be able to identify certain factual statements correctly, like the name of the president of the Commission and their country's commissioners, the location of most EU institutions, and the number of EU member states. Ten typical institutional items were included in the spring 1996 Eurobarometer (see Appendix 10A). Unfortunately the complexities and lack of transparency within the EU policymaking process, as well as the lack of direct elections for the leadership positions, create high hurdles to understanding the role of EU institutions and its leaders. The only occasion when the public has any direct opportunity to influence the EU policymaking process is during elections to the European parliament, and even here their influence is limited because of the continued weakness of the

parliament as an institution, and because parties usually fail to contest European elections primarily on EU issues²⁷. Consequently for most people, most of the time, there is no practical incentive to learn about EU institutions. This can be deplored from a traditional 'civics' standpoint, since full citizenship should involve awareness of the growing powers, scope and responsibilities of the EU. But from the perspective of practical political knowledge, that is, information to do something, learning mundane details about the role of the Economic and Social Committee, the Common Agricultural Policy, or who heads the European Commission, deserves low priority on rational grounds. In contrast, if people are unaware that exposure to the sun risks skin cancer for their children, or that they have a right to work in another country, or what the euro means for retail prices, this matters to their lives, producing higher learning incentives.

Party Policies

Lastly the most challenging aspects of political knowledge, with perhaps the highest information hurdles, concerns how far people proved well informed about party policies in elections to the European Parliament. Much of the literature in cognitive psychology has defined political knowledge in these terms. Classical theories of rational voting suggest that to cast an informed ballot, electors need to understand the major issue differences between the contending parties, so that they can link their policy and ideological preferences to their ballot choices. If voters lack accurate perceptions of what political parties stand for, they may unintentionally cast their ballot for policies they disagree with. One major difficulty in assessing this issue concerns how we assess the accuracy of voter's perceptions. When assessing simple factual statements, like the number of EU member states [15], there is no ambiguity about the correct response. With assessments of party policies, however, often perceptions are more a matter of judgment than fact. One benchmark which can be used to assess the accuracy of voter's perceptions of party policies is available in the 1994 European Election study that asked electors to place the parties in their country on four 10-point scales: on the issues of the single European currency, national border controls, employment program, and also their left-right ideological position (see Appendix 10A). The median assessments of each party by the electorate can be compared with where candidates for the European parliament placed their own party on the same scales, (from the European Candidates Study 1994), taken as a fairly accurate indicator of party policy. Previous research suggests there may well be a systematic perceptual bias in how voters and candidates perceive party positions²⁸, but nevertheless EP candidates can be regarded as well informed about the policy positions taken by their party. The key question in this study is not the relative proximity or distance of voters' perceptions from party policies, analyzed elsewhere²⁹, but rather whether those most attentive to the news media proved most accurate in their judgments.

The strategy employed to explore these issues first examined the dependent variables, in terms of the distribution of political knowledge scales. Descriptive cross-tabulations were used without any controls to examine the simple bivariate association between exposure to each of the news media and the five scale measures of knowledge. The final step examined these relationships using ordinary least-squared regression models controlling for demographic factors (gender, age, education, and household income) and attitudinal factors (political

interest, pro-EU attitudes, and left-right ideology)³⁰. These models used a media scale which combining use of television news, newspapers and radio. Given the contextual differences in news environments that we have already documented, region and nation were included as dummy variables in the regression models. In all cases a positive coefficient indicates that greater exposure to the news media was associated with higher knowledge.

The Impact of the News Media on Political Knowledge

What is the evidence that the public were well informed about these different types of issue and, in particular, did those who were most exposed to news prove the most knowledgeable? Table 10.1 shows the simple distribution of the percentage of correct responses to the items measuring knowledge of the risks of cancer, the euro, EU rights and EU institutions.

[Table 10.1 about here]

The results show quite a wide spread in these items, especially in the last two columns. On the institutional scale, for example, while two thirds were aware that most EU institutions were in Brussels or Luxembourg, and half knew that the European flag had a blue background and yellow/gold stars, nevertheless on the more 'civics' end of the scale less than a fifth could name the leading spokesperson for the EU, Jacques Santer as President of the Commission, and in Fall 1996 only one in twenty realized that the euro notes and coins were going to be in their pockets by the year 2002. In general there tended to be far higher awareness of the social issues of the risks of cancer from exposure to the sun, which most directly affects people's lives, and least knowledge about the more distant and abstract institutional items that have little practical relevance. People can still grasp many of the most important aspects of the European Union without memorizing such facts as the number or name the Commissioners from their country, which they are powerless to influence as government appointments.

[Table 10.2 about here]

The issue at the heart of this chapter is the role of the media in cognitive awareness. An examination of the bivariate relationship between use of television news, newspapers and radio news and the proportion of correct answers to the first four dimensions shows that in nearly every case the most regular users of the news media were more likely to prove politically knowledgeable across all dimensions. The difference between those who used the media everyday and other groups was usually fairly modest, but on the more demanding items the knowledge gap proved more substantial, for example in terms of hearing about citizenship rights within the EU. Moreover despite the many different items used in the scales, the knowledge gap for the euro, citizenship rights and EU institutions was consistent. This gap was less surprising among regular newspaper readers but, in contrast to the videomalaise thesis, it was also evident among viewers of TV news.

[Table 10.3 about here]

Of course one possible explanation could be that those who were drawn to the news were disproportionately found among the well-educated and more affluent social groups, as well as those who were already most motivated to follow politics and European affairs due to their prior inclinations and interests. Prior involvement in politics has often

been found to be one of the strongest predictors of media use³¹. As argued earlier it is difficult to resolve this issue through cross-sectional survey data. Nevertheless Table 10.3 examines whether use of the news media continues to prove significant on the first four dimensions of political knowledge after controlling for the structural and attitudinal variables discussed earlier, as well as national controls. The regression models show a fairly consistent pattern across each dimension. In every case, as expected, the more knowledgeable usually proved to be well educated, more affluent, younger, and usually male³², as well as those who were most interested in politics and more pro-European in their leanings.

The strength of the relationship between attention to the news media and the political knowledge scales weakens once these controls are introduced, suggesting that people who are more educated or more pro-European will prove both more attentive to the news media and more knowledgeable about EU affairs. Yet at the same time, and this is the important point, even after structural and attitudinal controls are introduced, exposure to the news media still continued to exert a significant independent effect on political knowledge.

What is the relationship between uses of the news media and the last and most demanding dimension of knowledge, the ability of voters to identify party policies with some degree of accuracy? In theories of representative party government, this is the most critical type of information for voters. If people are unaware of where the parties stand on the major issues of the day, they are unable to cast an informed ballot based on prospective policy platforms. We can examine the correlation between attention to news media in the 1994 European election campaign and the public's ability to place each national party accurately on 10-point scales measuring party positions towards the single currency, national borders, the European employment program, and general left-right ideology. This represents a strong test of the thesis, since at least two of these issues (on borders and jobs) were of low salience to the European public. The 'accurate' rating of each party position on these scales, establishing the benchmark, is estimated by where candidates to the European parliament placed their own party on these scales. The correlations between the public perceptions and the 'actual' position of parties are measured at national party level for 60 different European parties.

[Table 10.4 about here]

The general results in Table 10.4 show that the public proved relatively well-informed on most issues: there was a strong correlation between public perceptions and the actual position of parties across all items, but particularly on the ideological scale. As previous studies have found³³, despite the low interest in European elections, and the complexities of party policies on these issues, most voters knew reasonably well where the different parties stood on matters like the euro or national borders. This may well surprise those who believe that the public remains ignorant of many major issues of public policy. But what is most important for our argument is that those who paid greatest attention to the news media proved consistently more accurate in their assessments of party policies across the three policy issues than the inattentive³⁴. On the general ideology scale there was no difference; since the left-right dimension is one of the commonest ways of understanding differences in European party politics, most voters could assess party positions irrespective of media cues. Contrary to

the videomalaise thesis, the results suggest that the information provided by the news media helped voters understand the party choices they faced on some of the key issues facing the European Union.

Conclusions: Practical Information and Citizenship

Two alternative perspectives for conceptualizing political knowledge are common in the literature. On the one hand, there is the 'civics' fallacy, which holds up an ideal of textbook knowledge, which most voters fail. On the other, there is the 'relativist' fallacy, in which whatever voters 'know' is deemed sufficient for electoral choice. We aim to steer a middle course between these two positions, arguing that citizens need practical knowledge to evaluate the consequences of their actions.

What does this conceptualization of practical political knowledge imply for the role of the news media as a civic forum? Critics commonly castigate the news media for failing to provide serious coverage of policy issues and public affairs. If we accept that knowledge is contextual and multidimensional it follows that citizens need a variety of different types of practical political information: about personal health as well as politics, polls as well as policies, evaluations of character as well as party strategy, editorial commentary as well as campaign debates, and vox pop as well as the leadership speeches. If politics is understood to be part of our daily lives, involving everyday decisions about our health, lifestyles and community, it is just as important for us to learn about a drugs breakthrough in AIDS, or the dangers of dioxin in eggs, or problems of sexual harassment in the workplace, as it is to learn about European parliamentary debates over CAP or a meeting of the G-8. Given this understanding, it is therefore illegitimate to assume, as some critics do, that the civic function of news is limited to coverage of government and the public policy process. Instead in this view the news environment most conducive to public learning is one that provides a wide range of political information (broadly defined), in different formats and at different levels, so that citizens can select the type of practical information most useful to them.

What does the public learn from the news media? The evidence from this study suggests that levels of awareness of the issues under comparison vary substantially. The public tended to know more about the social issue of skin cancer, which affect their daily lives, than about the more abstract and distant issues of EU institutions and leaders. Many studies claiming that the public is fairly clueless about politics are often based on 'civics' tests that fail to demonstrate why it matters whether, for instance, people can identify the capital of Iceland, the name of the head of the United Nations, or how many members are elected to Congress. There is no rational incentive to memorize facts with no practical relevance to citizen's multiple political roles.

The conclusions of this analysis are that, even after controlling for prior educational levels and political interest, exposure to the news media contributes positively to what European citizens learn, whether about everyday social matters like personal health or more abstract and distant issues of party politics within the European Union. For the moment we will leave aside the question about whether there is a similar or different pattern in the United States until we

can discuss this in detail later (Chapter 12). Of course with cross-sectional analysis we can never demonstrate conclusively that the associations we have established are due to the process of reading newspapers or watching television, which requires time-series panel studies. Yet as argued elsewhere, given the controls in our models, it seems most plausible to assume that in the long-term there is a virtuous circle; people with higher cognitive skills and political interest are most likely to pay attention to the news media, and, in turn, the process of media exposure is likely to add to our store of political knowledge. The reason is that if you already understand something about the role of the Commission or the functions of the European parliament, you are more likely to be able to process new information about implementation of the euro or the appointment of Roman Prodi as president of the Commission or debates about enlargement. In a nutshell, the more you know, the more you learn. But if people do learn from the news media, and the messages, as we have seen in Chapter 8, tend to be negative, do they also perhaps learn to become more wary and mistrustful of government and political leaders? Does an unduly cynical media produce a cynical public? We need to go on to examine this issue.

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

Table 10.1: Distribution of Political Knowledge

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

<i>% Correct</i>	<i>Cancer Risks</i>	<i>Euro</i>	<i>EU Ri</i>
Knows too much sun contributes to aging of the skin	90		
The sun is most dangerous for people of fair complexion	88		
Knows some moles can develop into skin cancer	88		
Knows can study in any EU state			
Knows can seek work in another EU state			
Knows euro will be the only official EU currency		65	
City of most EU institutions is Brussels or Luxembourg			
Knows euro is worth the same all member states		61	
Knows colours of the EU flag are blue/yellow			
Knows Euro is the same as the Ecu		53	
Knows if the sun is covered by clouds, there's still a risk of sunburn	51		
Euro will not need to be converted		50	
Can name the new currency (euro)			
Knows no need to change driving license if move			
Knows can travel without passport/id			
Getting brown before the holidays does not protect you efficiently from the harmful effects of the sun	43		
Knows no need to use customs for EU goods			
Knows do not need work permit in another EU state			
Knows can vote in local elections in another EU state			
Knows right to receive unemployment benefit if seeking work in another EU state			
Can identify the name of a Commissioner			
Common emergency number			
Can identify the correct number of Member States (15)			
Can identify the nation holding the Presidency of EU			
Can identify the value of ECU			
Can identify the number of Commissioners			
Can identify the name of the Commission President			
Can identify the year euro notes/coins will be introduced (2002)			10

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

Note: Items recoded into a consistent direction to represent the 'correct' response.

Sources: Knowledge of Cancer Risks, Euro, EU Rights from Eurobarometer 46.0 Fall 1996 N. 16,248

Knowledge of EU Institutions from Eurobarometer 45.0 spring 1996; Knowledge of EU Party Policies: 41.1 fall 1994.

Table 10.2: Patterns of Media Use and Knowledge

<i>% Correct</i>	<i>Cancer Risks</i>	<i>Euro</i>	<i>Know EU Rights</i>	<i>Heard of EU Rights</i>
All	66.5	47.7	48.6	36
TV News				
Never	63.8	42.2	44.1	31
Sometimes	65.1	45.9	47.9	35
Everyday	67.1	48.8	49.1	37
Newspaper				
Never	66.4	42.2	53.9	28
Sometimes	65.8	48.2	48.5	36
Everyday	66.8	50.2	50.9	40
Radio News				
Never	66.6	44.5	46.2	30
Sometimes	64.7	47.6	48.3	36
Everyday	67.3	49.6	50.0	39

Chapter from Pippa Norris "A Virtuous Circle: Political Communications in Post-Industrial Societies." (New York: Russell Sage Press, Fall 2000)

Zero order correlation between media use and knowledge scale (R)	.05**	.13**	.15**	.13
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Note: See Appendix 10A for details of all scale items. The scales have been standardized for comparability across columns. ** P.01

Sources: Knowledge of Cancer Risks, Euro, EU Rights from Eurobarometer 46.0 Fall 1996 N. 16,248; Knowledge of EU Institutions from Eurobarometer 45.0 spring 1996; Knowledge of EU Party Policies: 41.1 fall 1994.

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

Table 10.3: Predictors of Knowledge, EU-15 Mid-1990s

	<i>Risks of cancer</i>	<i>Sig</i>	<i>Euro</i>	<i>Sig</i>	<i>EU Rights</i>	<i>Sig</i>	<i>EU Institutions</i>	<i>Sig</i>	<i>Operation</i>
STRUCTURAL									
Education	.02		.09	**	.09	**	.19	**	Age finished full-time education
Gender: Male	-.12	**	.06	**	.07	**	.17	**	Male (1) Female (0)
Age	.04	**	-.01	**	-.13	**	.07	**	Age in years
Household Income	.01		.03	**	.07	**	.09	**	Harmonized income scale
ATTITUDINAL									
Political discussion	.01		.10	**	.07	**	.14	**	How often discuss: never, often
Pro-EU attitudes	.11	**	.08	**	.11	**	.11	**	Member + benefit scale
Left-Right Ideology	.03	**	.01		.01		.01		10 point scale: From left to right
USE OF NEWS MEDIA									
Media News Use	.06	**	.11	**	.05	**	.17	**	15-point use of TV news + print
NATION									
Austria	-.17	**	.05	**	.02		.12	**	
Belgium	-.14	**	.01		.02		.03	**	
Denmark	.01		-.15	**	.14	**	.08	**	
Finland	-.08	**	-.07	**	.15	**	.04	**	
France	-.04	*	-.04	**	.11	**	-.01		
Germany	-.14	**	.08	**	.07	**	.07	**	
Ireland	-.08	**	.02		.01		-.01		
Italy	-.01		-.12	*	.02	*	-.01		
Luxembourg	-.03	**	.02	**	.05	**	.08	**	
Netherlands	-.12	**	-.26	**	.14	**	-.04	**	
Portugal	-.08	**	-.04	*	.01		-.01		

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

Spain	-.06 **	-.02 **	-.03 **	-.04 **	
Sweden	-.08 **	-.05 **	.14 **	-.04 **	
UK	-.02	-.18 **	.07 **	-.12 **	
Constant	66.9	28.4	28.4	17.7	
R2	.06	.17	.16	.28	
N.	16247	16247	16247	65178	

Notes: Columns report the standardized beta coefficients predicting knowledge based on ordinary least squared dependent variable is the 100-point scale measuring knowledge. See Appendix 10A for details. Sig. P. **>.01 dummies, Greece is excluded.

Sources: Cancer, Euro, EU Rights: Eurobarometer 46.0 Fall 1996 N. 16,248. Weighted EU -15.

EU Institutions: Eurobarometer 44.2bis Jan-Mar 1996. Weighted EU-15

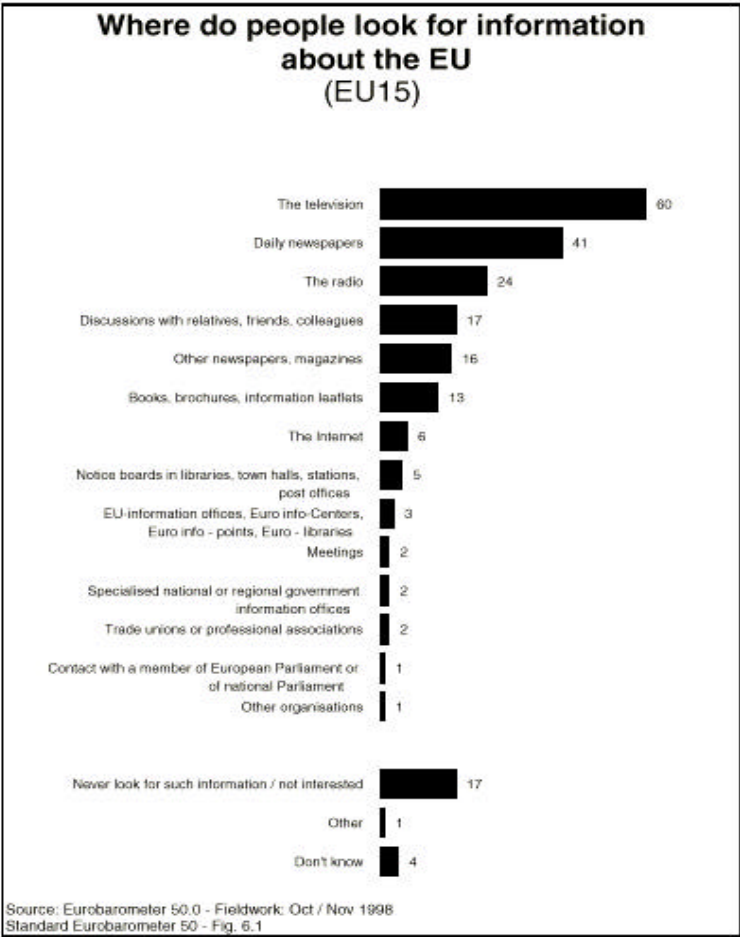
Table 10.4: Correlation between Media Use and Knowledge of Party Policies

	<i>Low Media Use in Campaign</i>	<i>High Media Use in Campaign</i>
Left-Right Scale	.894	.892
Euro	.653	.699
National Borders	.567	.712
Employment Program	.675	.710

Note: Correlation at national party-level (N. 60) between voters' perceptions of party positions on 10 -pc position of party policies, as assessed by candidates for the European Parliament. All coefficients are signif

Sources: European Representation Study, 1994; Eurobarometer 41.1 The European Election Study.

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



Appendix 10A: Questions in Scale Measures

Eurobarometer 46.0 Fall 1996:

Knowledge of the Euro

Q. 32. "I am going to read out a number of statements. For each one of them, could you please tell me whether you think it is true or false? The single currency, the euro, in which some countries will take part in 2002...

a) Will be the only official currency in the European Union and will be used to pay for goods and services in all participating member states. (True/False/Dk)

b) Will still need to be changed into the currency of another participating Member State in order to pay for goods and services bought in that Member State. (True/False/Dk)

c) Will be worth the same whatever the participating Member State, that is if you change a euro used in your country into dollars, you will receive the same amount as if you had changed into dollars a euro used in another country. (True/False/Dk)

d) Is exactly the same as the Ecu, only the name is different. (True/False/Dk)

Q28. "Notes and coins in the European currency, that is in euro, may be introduced some time after exchange rates are. In December this year designs for the European currency's banknotes will be chosen. When do you think these notes and coins will be introduced?

Before 1999/In 1999/In 2000/In 2001/In 2002/In 2003/In 2004/In 2005 /Later/Never/Don't Know.

Knowledge of European Rights

For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you think they are true or false.

a) You have to have a work permit in order to be able to work in another European Union member country. [False]

b) You are allowed to vote in local elections in another European Union country, if you are resident there. [False]

c) You are allowed to seek work placement with firms in other European countries. [True]

d) You have no right to receive unemployment benefit from (OUR COUNTRY) if you go to another European Union country to look for work. [False]

e) There is a common telephone number for emergency services in all European Union countries. [False]

f) You are not allowed to have a savings account with a bank or buy insurance in another European Union country to look for work. [False]

g) You are allowed to travel around the European Union without showing your passport or identity card. [True]

- h) You are allowed to study in any European Union country. [True]
- i) You have to go through customs when you bring home goods that you have bought in another European Union country for your own personal use. [True]
- j) You have to change your driving license when you move to another European Union country. [False]

Awareness of EU Rights

Q69a: "Have you heard, over the last few years, about the rights and opportunities you have, as a citizen of the European Union, to...

- a) Go and live in any European Union country?
- b) Go and work or start up a business in any other European Union country, under the same conditions as the citizens of that country?
- c) Go and study in any European Union country
- d) Buy good for your personal use in any other European Union country and bring them back home, without going through customs?
- e) Be reimbursed for any urgent medical attention you may need in another European country?
- f) Be guaranteed adequate health and safety standards in the workplace anywhere in the European Union?
- g) Be guaranteed equal treatment at work, without discrimination based on sex, anywhere in the European Union?
- h) Borrow and invest from banks anywhere in the European Union?
- i) Take out an insurance policy anywhere in the European Union?
- j) If you live in another European Union country, to vote and stand as a candidate in local elections there?
- k) If you live in another European Union country, to vote and stand as a candidate in European elections there?

Knowledge of EU Institutions

Do you happen to know...?

- a) The current number of states in the European Union? [15]
- b) The name of the President of the European Commission [Jacques Santer]
- c) The number of [NATIONALITY] Commissioners [2 or 1 depending upon member state]
- d) The name of one [NATIONALITY] Commissioner [Name]
- e) The recently chosen name of the European currency [the euro]
- f) The country which holds the Presidency of the European Union since January 1st and until end of June 1996 [Italy]
- g) The current value of the ECU in [NATIONAL CURRENCY]

- h) The city in which most of the European Union institutions are located [Brussels or Luxembourg]
- i) One of the two colours of the European flag [yellow/gold or blue]
- j) The year when notes and coins in the European currency will be introduced [2002]

Knowledge of Cancer Risks

Examples of some of the items.

Q17. "For each of the following statements, could you please tell me if you tend to agree or tend to disagree?"

- a) Too much sun contributes to the development of skin cancer.
- b) Too much use of sun beds contributes to the development of skin cancer.
- c) Too much sun contributes to the aging of skin
- d) Too much use of sun beds contributes to the aging of skin
- e) If the sun is covered with clouds, there is no risk of being overexposed or getting sunburnt
- f) Some moles can develop into skin cancer
- g) Sunburn is more dangerous for children than adults.
- h) Getting brown before the holidays protects you efficiently from the harmful effects of the sun."

Knowledge of Party Policies (Eurobarometer 41.1 Summer 1994)

Q44."Some people think it would be best for [OUR COUNTRY] to keep its own currency and make it more independent from the other European currencies. Others think the best thing would be to create a common European currency....

More independent national currency					New common European currency				
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Where would you place yourself on this scale? And where would you place the [OUR COUNTRY] parties on this scale?"

Q.45. "Another important problem for the European Union is unemployment. The President of the European Union has proposed to raise funds for a massive employment programme in order to fight unemployment. Others argue that the completion of the Single European Market alone will promote economic growth and will be the best remedy for the current problem of unemployment. What is your opinion?..."

[Same 10-point scale as above]

Q.46." Still another issue with the European Union has to do with national borders. What do you think? Should the European Union continue to remove national borders and let people move freely between countries, or should we reintroduce tighter border controls in order to be better able to fight crime in [OUR COUNTRY]."

¹ See, for example, Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch. 1991. 'Political Communications Systems and Democratic Values.' In *Democracy and the Mass Media* ed. Judith Lichtenberg. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

² Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson and Hazel Gaudet. 1944. *The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes Up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign*. New York: Columbia University Press.

³ See, for example, J.R. Robinson and M. Levy. 1986. *The Main Source: Learning from TV News*. Beverley Hills, CA: Sage.

⁴ Steven H. Chaffee and Joan Schleuder. 1986. 'Measurement and effects of attention to media news.' *Human Communication Research*. 13:76-107; Hugh Culbertson and Guido H. Stempel III. 1986. 'How media use and reliance affect knowledge level.' *Communication Research*. 13:579-602.

⁵ Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter. 1996. *What Americans Know about Politics and Why it Matters*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. See also Stephen Bennett. 1989. 'Trends in American Political Information, 1967-1987.' *American Politics Quarterly*. 17(4): 422-435.

⁶ Using a battery of five questions about international affairs, like identifying who headed the United Nations or who was president of Russia, Bennett found that knowledge was particularly low in the United States compared with Canada, Britain, Germany and France. See Stephen Earl Bennett, Richard S. Flickenger, John R. Baker, Staci L. Rhine and Linda M. Bennett. 1996. 'Citizens' Knowledge of Foreign Affairs'. *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 1(2): 10-29.

⁷ See Pippa Norris et al. 1999. *On Message*. London: Sage.

⁸ See, for example, Thomas Patterson. 1993. *Out of Order*. New York: Vintage.

⁹ Robert Lichter and Ted J. Smith. 1996. 'Why Elections are Bad News: Media and Candidate Discourse in the 1996 Presidential Primaries.' *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*. 1(4): 15-35.

¹⁰ For a discussion see Doris Graber. 1994. 'Why Voters Fail Information Tests: Can the Hurdles be Overcome?' *Political Communication*, 11(4): 331-346.

¹¹ Paul Sniderman, Richard Brody and Philip Tetlock. *Reasoning and Choice: Explorations in Political Psychology*. New York: Cambridge University Press; John Zaller. 1993. *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. New York: Cambridge University Press; Samuel Popkin. 1994. *The Reasoning Voter*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Doris Graber. 1988. *Processing the News: How People Tame the Information Tide*. White Plains: Longman.

¹² Russell Neuman, Marion R. Just and Ann N. Crigler. 1992. *Common Knowledge*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, P.77; Marion R. Just, Ann N. Crigler, Dean E. Alger, Timothy E. Cook, Montague Kern and Darrell M. West. 1996. *Crosstalk: Citizens, Candidates and the Media in a Presidential Campaign*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹³ Karl R. Popper. 1972. *Objective Knowledge*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

¹⁴ Pippa Norris et al. 1999. *On Message*. London: Sage. P.103.

¹⁵ For evidence of the inability of many American voters to identify the policy stands of major presidential candidates see Robert Entman. 1989. *Democracy without Citizens: Media and the Decay of American Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. P. 25.

¹⁶ Richard Morin. 1999. 'Not a clue: The economy's booming and crime's down, but many Americans believe it ain't so.' *The Washington Post Weekly Edition*. 14 June 1999. p.34.

¹⁷ Quoted in Richard Morin. 1999. 'Not a clue: The economy's booming and crime's down, but many Americans believe it ain't so.' *The Washington Post Weekly Edition*. 14 June 1999. p.34.

¹⁸ For a discussion see Anthony Downs. 1957. *An Economic Theory of Democracy*: 207-259; Arthur Lupia and Mathew D. McCubbins. 1998. *The Democratic Dilemma*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁹ Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter. 1996. *What Americans Know about Politics and Why it Matters*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. P.179.

²⁰ Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet. 1944. *The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes Up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign*. New York: Columbia University Press; Angus Campbell, Philip Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes. 1960. *The American Voter*. New York: Wiley.

²¹ Steven H. Chaffee and Joan Schleuder. 1986. 'Measurement and effects of attention to media news.' *Human Communication Research*. 13:76-107; Hugh Culbertson and Guido H. Stempel III. 1986. 'How media use and reliance affect knowledge level.' *Communication Research*. 13:579-602.

²² Use of the Internet was not included in the Fall 1996 Eurobarometer survey so this was examined separately. It should also be noted that unfortunately we lack measures of news media attention, which studies suggest may be a better indicator than news media exposure per se.

²³ Fiona Chew. 1994. 'The relationship of information needs to issue relevance and media use.' *Journalism Quarterly*. 71: 676-88; Steven Chaffee and Stacey Frank. 1996. 'How Americans get political information: Print versus broadcast news.' *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. 546: 48-58.

²⁴ Steven Chaffee and Stacey Frank. 1996. 'How Americans get Political Information: Print versus Broadcast News'. In *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science: The Media and Politics* edited by Kathleen Hall Jamieson. Volume 546: 48-58; David Weaver. 'What Voters Learn from Media.' In *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science: The Media and Politics* edited by Kathleen Hall Jamieson. Volume 546:34-47.

²⁵ Pippa Norris et al. 1999. *On Message: Communicating the Campaign*. London: Sage. P.103.

²⁶ European Commission. 1999. *European Public Opinion on the Single Currency*. Brussels. European Commission DG X/A2.

²⁷ Cees van der Eijk and Mark Franklin. Eds. 1996. *Choosing Europe*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

²⁸ See Pippa Norris. 1999. 'New Politicians? Changes in Party Competition at Westminster.' In *Critical Elections: British Voters and Parties in Long-Term Perspective* edited by Geoffrey Evans and Pippa Norris. London: Sage.

²⁹ See Hermann Schmitt and Jacques Thomassen. Eds. 1999. *Political Representation and Legitimacy in the European Union*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

³⁰ 'Political interest' was measured by how often the respondent discussed politics with friends and colleagues. Pro-EU attitudes were measured by the combined 'membership' and 'benefit' items already described in Chapter 8. Left-right ideology was gauged by the 10-point self-placement scale.

³¹ Hugh Culbertson and Guido H. Stempel III. 1986. 'How media use and reliance affect knowledge level.' *Communication Research*. 13:579-602.

³² Although it is interesting that on the issue of the risks of cancer the gender relationship reversed, with women proving more knowledgeable than men.

³³ Wouter van der Brug and Cees van der Eijk. 1999. 'The Cognitive Basis of Voting'. In Hermann Schmitt and Jacques Thomassen. Eds. *Political Representation and Legitimacy in the European Union*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

³⁴ The difference by media use proved modest, but this may be attributed to the limited measure used to gauge news exposure. Instead of the usual items the EES 94 used the following item. "At the European elections, we have just had, the parties and candidates campaigned for votes. Did the campaign come to your attention in any of the following ways?...Coverage of the campaign in newspapers (Yes/No)... Coverage of the campaign on TV and radio (Yes/No)."